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["WILL YOU READ THIS LETTER, LORD ARDEN?" THE LAWYER CRIED, FEELING HIS TASK A HARD ONE.]

NOEL LORD ARDEN.

CHAPTER VI.

NOEL could not in the least understand the impression his dream had made on him. He was distinctly a thoughtful, collected man, one of the last to act on impulse, or be swayed by superstition. He had one of those temperaments (blessed alike to the possessor and his friends) which have a knack of taking life equably. He had strong feelings, but it required a great deal to rouse them. As a lad he had mourned his father very truly; later on he had felt a sincere regret for his uncle's death; but for the rest Noel had taken life as it came, and usually found things fall pleasantly.

In the years when his mother had troubled herself very really about his future, when she had felt that, brought up to no profession, his lot would be a hard one if his uncle changed his mind and married, Noel had been almost provokingly indifferent. For his part, he

told Lady Nora, he never could see the use of anticipating trouble. If a Countess of Arden came home, his uncle was a just man, and would launch him in some career. If he had to work no doubt he should manage to get on. What was the good of fancying hardships which might never come! Then, again, when he was Lord Arden and the hundred thousand pounds, of which mention has been made, melted in his hands with such surprising ease, he never troubled himself with regrets. He knew he had an ample income, and that he was right principled enough not to incur debts he could not pay. It had been very pleasant, feeling he possessed that legacy, but now it was gone he never troubled.

So that you see clearly Noel was the last man in the world to indulge in superstitious fancies or sentimental whims. And yet, from the September evening when he found that still motionless figure in the Foxgrove lanes, he was haunted perpetually by a pair of dark blue eyes. Little as he had seen of her, few as were the words he had heard her speak, he could not forget the girl he had rescued. He understood Mrs. Dane's pru-

dence in speeding her on her journey. He knew quite well an unmarried man can be no use even as a friend to a girl in trouble; but his mind ran strangely on the episode—so much so that when he had parted from Brabourne he paid a flying visit to Foxgrove on his own account, surprised Mrs. Dane by an *impromptu* call, and artfully turning the conversation on his last arrival, asked her point-blank whether she had ever heard any more of her mysterious guest!

Nan detected the anxiety hidden in his tone. She was a kind-hearted little lady, and one not given to equivocation. She answered Lord Arden frankly—she had heard no more of Nell, and that she often thought about her.

"I asked her if ever she was in trouble to come to me, but I fear she will hardly do so. You see, Lord Arden, she was a lady, and so I think she would hide her sorrows jealously rather than ask a stranger's help!"

"I have often thought about her," confessed Noel.

"So have I!"

"And you have no idea of her story?"

"I know that she had lately lost her mother, and was going to London to seek employment; but where she came from, and what name followed Nell, I know as little as you do!"

Noel went home after that interview to find Judith established at the Court; and seeing what his mother's wishes were, feeling himself it was almost time he "settled down," he did try and fancy the pretty visitor his destiny; but it would not do. Whenever he was alone with Judith those blue eyes used to rise up before him, and Nell's face seemed to stand as a shadowy barrier between him and Miss Watts.

He had believed the mysterious influence over him would cease as soon as he returned home, but, instead, it grew stronger and stronger until at length Nell stood before him in a dream and uttered that brief, yearning prayer,—

"Come!"

The impression that she was in danger seized on him. In spite of his common sense, which protested dreams were mere rubbish, and this one occasioned solely by the fact of his thinking so often of its heroine—in spite of his knowing nothing whatever of Nell's plans, of his having no idea what part of London she had meant to go—of his not even knowing her surname he never hesitated. He woke from that dream with but one thought to get to London as soon as possible.

"Tra would call me mad!" he reflected as he studied Bradshaw. "My mother would declare I was suffering from brain fever. If I heard the story of anyone else, I know I should advise his friends to shut him up in an asylum, and yet I cannot help it. Something stronger than myself urges me to go to London, and to go at once!"

His man's amazement made Noel recollect how very strange his sudden departure would seem to everyone. The post was not in, so that he could not plead business summoning him to London. The valet had been in his service for years, and it was the merest chance that Andrew had not been in attendance on that memorable visit to Foxgrove.

"Andrew," said Lord Arden, gravely, "go and meet the postman and bring my letters up here. I am expecting one of great importance!"

And there was no untruth in the statement. Noel was expecting to hear from his lawyer, Mr. Harding, about the final winding-up of those mines which had swallowed up most of his uncle's legacy, and as the letter might say he would be called on to produce a few more thousands before he was satisfactorily out of the affair, most men would have considered it of "great importance," though we are bound to confess Noel had not thought much about it previous to his determination to go to London, and find some ostensible excuse for the abruptness of his departure.

For ten minutes he was left alone, then Andrew returned with quite a pile of letters upon a tray. Telling the valet to wait, Noel glanced through the heap till he recognised the lawyer's writing. If Mr. Harding had known the young Earl's secret wishes he could not have made his letter more in unison with them.

"DEAR LORD ARDEN,—It is most desirable that I should see you personally respecting those shares about which you consulted me, and another matter, which I do not care to trust to letters. Would it be convenient for you to meet me here, or shall I come to High-shire? I assure you the affair is urgent, and will not brook delay.—You are faithfully,
GEORGE HARDING."

"Just as I thought," said Noel, speaking half to himself. "I knew he'd want to lecture me on prudence and the like before he got me out of the scrap." Then to his valet,

"Andrew, I shall go to London by the eleven o'clock express; you had better pack up and follow by a later train."

"Am I to pack for long, my lord?"

This question, though perfectly natural, was discomposing, for Lord Arden had never given a thought to the extent of his absence.

"A week—a month. I don't know," he said irritably. "What does it matter? Pack what you please, and don't trouble me."

Andrew marvelled at the reply, for Lord Arden was mostly a good-tempered man. Affairs must be going very wrong in London, decided the valet, to put the master in such a mood. However, as he much preferred life in the pleasant chambers in Piccadilly to a perpetual residence at Arden Court, he was not at all disposed to grumble at the orders for immediate departure.

But a harder task awaited Noel in the breakfast-room. His mother at all times grew desponding when he went away, even when she had had weeks in which to become reconciled to the idea; but for him to go to London in November, when he had not long returned from a protracted absence, would be a terrible blow to her, especially as it would not augur well for the success of her darling scheme.

Judy and Lady Nora were both at the table when Noel made his appearance; the former looked charming in a ruby cashmere toilet, but, alas! Noel never noticed it. As far as he was concerned, she might as well have been attired in sackcloth.

He did wonder a little gloomily, as he sat down, why some girls had everything they could wish for, while others were forced to fight for daily bread. A most unjust reflection as regards poor Judy, since never in her life had she enjoyed "good times" until she came to Arden Court, and even here there was a serious drawback to her felicity in his own backwardness as a lover.

"It is a beautiful day!" remarked Lady Nora. "The ice on the long pond will bear splendidly, and you young people will have some famous skating. You will be quite an expert before the winter is over, Judy!"

Lord Arden started—here was his opportunity.

"I am awfully sorry, Miss Watts"—sometimes he called her Judith—"but I shall not be able to skate with you this morning. I have to go to London on business."

If a bombshell had exploded in their midst the two ladies could hardly have betrayed greater consternation.

"To London!" said Judy, opening her black eyes very wide. "Why, Lord Arden, you said only yesterday London was horrid in November—nothing but fogs?"

He really had said so, but he did not enjoy hearing his remark repeated.

"Nevertheless, I am obliged to go; business is a hard mistress, and brooks no delay."

Lady Nora looked at him wistfully.

"Couldn't you put it off for a few days, Noel? The ice will not bear much longer, and it is such a pity for Judy to lose the skating!"

Noel smiled to himself at the very transparent artifice to detain him there by Miss Watts until the decisive words had been spoken.

"I fear I have no choice. Harding writes most gloomily. Would you like to see his letter?"

Lady Nora possessed the most implicit faith in the family lawyer, and she was also of a far more anxious temperament than her son.

When she had read Mr. Harding's summons she made no more demur, but resigned herself to the inevitable.

"But you will make haste back, Noel? Surely Mr. Harding won't keep you more than a day or two? You will be home by the end of the week?"

"I will come home the moment I have satisfied myself about the business which takes me," was Noel's somewhat enigmatical response. "But I can't quite say when it will be."

"Mr. Harding is very prompt."

"Yes."

"Noel," exclaimed his mother, suddenly alive to the fact that he had not touched his

devilish chicken, and was sending his cup to be replenished for the third time, "what is the matter? You are eating nothing at all!"

Lord Arden looked up impatiently. "There's nothing the matter; I'm not hungry."

Perplexed by his manner Lady Nora said nothing more till they had left the table; then, sending Judith to gather some hot-house flowers, she went up to her son, and put one hand upon his arm.

"Noel, I am sure something is troubling you. You are more worried than you will admit, or you would never take this hurried journey!"

"I assure you, mother," protested Lord Arden, "Harding has told me nothing more than is in the letter I showed you."

"But that is bad enough."

"Oh, no!" said Noel, speaking cheerfully, because he noticed his manner had alarmed her; "that's only the old man's way. I told him to get rid of those unfortunate shares at any sacrifice, and I suppose he finds it will cost me a few more thousands before I am really clear of them; so he thinks, as I have no father or elderly relative, it's his duty, as an old family lawyer, to read me a lecture on the evils of extravagance. That's all, depend upon it. I shall tell him his letter frightened you nearly into fits."

Lady Nora still looked troubled.

"Could you pay it, Noel?"

"Of course I could. There's a nest-egg still left of my uncle's legacy which ought to cover everything. If it doesn't, a loan would easily be arranged. Don't fret, mother; I've done with speculation for good now, and, if I've burnt my fingers a little, few men get off so easily."

"But—"

She hesitated so strangely that Noel was amused, and, guessing her meaning, completed her sentence.

"But it's rude to leave home while a visitor is here. I don't think so, mother. Judith Watts is your guest and friend. After her mother's letter to you she might almost be called a self-invited visitor; besides, she is a sensible girl, and won't take offence where none is meant."

"She is very nice."

"I am glad you think so."

"But, Noel, it is not about Judith I am troubled, though it is vexing you should have to leave when you are getting on so nicely. I don't like Mr. Harding's letter—I don't like it at all."

"Why, old lady," said Noel, smiling, "you used to swear by Harding! That imperative tone is only his manner, and, to do the old man justice, I think he takes almost a fatherly interest in me."

"I have the greatest faith in him; but what does he mean by the 'other matter' which he does not 'care to trust to letters'?"

"I have no idea."

"I feel sure something terrible is going to happen!" cried poor Lady Nora. "Oh, Noel! how can you take things so calmly?"

"Where's the use of troubling, mother? The shares are more worthless than I expected, I suppose."

His mother shook her head.

"It is something more than that! Oh, Noel, supposing your uncle left a wife and family?"

It was Lord Arden's turn to look bewildered. He stared at his mother as though she had suddenly become insane, and spoke more coldly to her than he had ever done before.

"I think you must be dreaming, mother, before you could even hint such a thing about a brother who all his life showed you the greatest kindness! What possible object could my uncle have had in concealing his marriage? We know perfectly that from the time he was disappointed of winning Kathleen Lealie, he lived an open, honourable life among his neighbours. For sixteen years he was Lord Arden of the Court, and during all

that time his name was never once linked with any woman's. For five of those years we lived with him, and you yourself told me when you consented to the plan your brother said distinctly he should never marry."

"He said he had loved and lost," corrected Lady Nora.

"Precisely. He loved Miss Leslie and lost her. Unlike many men, he preferred to be faithful to his first choice. Mother, I can't think what has put such a cruel thought about him in your head! You have amazed me."

Womanlike, Lady Nora was quite ready with her defence.

"It was Mrs. Watts who suggested the idea to me."

"More shame for her."

"Listen," pleaded Lady Nora. "On meeting again after so many years' separation it was only natural we should speak of Alan. I told Kathleen that I must always regard her with friendship as my brother's choice, and she shook her head quite sadly, saying,—

"I don't know what you have been told, but Alan never loved me nor I him. We were brother and sister—nothing more. If I had never met Frank your brother would not have asked me to be Lady Arden."

"And of course you asked why?"

"I did. She required a great deal of pressing, but at last she declared there was an attachment to some one abroad. She knew no particulars. Alan had certainly been single at the time of her own marriage or she might have claimed some property under my father's will, but she hinted strongly that there was something."

Noel simply laughed.

"Trust a woman for ferretting out a romance! I daresay the ideal to which my uncle was constant all his life may have been some foreign beauty, and not Kathleen Leslie at all; but I am sure he never married her. Most likely they were lovers, and waiting for my grandfather's death to leave him free. Then, during the suspense, she died. That is the most natural construction to put on Mrs. Watts's story, and I can quite understand that a poor girl, dying of anxiety and hope deferred during a long engagement, would cause that shadow of sadness which always seemed to hover over my uncle. No doubt he blamed himself for not risking his father's anger, and marrying her openly."

"You explain things so comfortably, Noel. Now, Mrs. Watts made me feel quite frightened."

Noel smiled.

"She seems to have had a great deal of trouble herself, poor woman, so perhaps she thought it only right to try and endow you with an imaginary one. Don't think any more about it, mother. I can remember my uncle telling me one day that whenever he died I should be Earl of Arden as surely as though I had been born Viscount Devenish. I would rather believe his word than Mrs. Watts's somewhat morbid imagination."

So the Earl dismissed his mother's fears, and as he travelled to London he well-nigh forgot the ostensible cause of his journey in his deep consideration by what means he might best attain the real end of his wanderings.

He had all an Englishman's dread of ridicule. He could no more have confessed, even to his closest friend, that he had come to London at the bidding of a dream than he could have told his mother why his heart was Steele against Judith's beauty. He was in search of Nell; he had made up his mind not to go home until he had found her, but yet he felt he had set out on a well-nigh impossible chase.

He had nothing in the world to guide him except his own memory of her face, and the fact that she was poor. It was among the toilers of life's hire—not amid the pleasure-seekers—that he must seek her, and of another fact he felt terribly, grievously certain—that she was in heavy trouble.

He went to Mr. Harding's that very afternoon. He believed his quest for Nell would

be a long one, and he wanted his mind freed from all other business before he commenced it; besides, he had a great esteem for the old lawyer. He could not have told him the whole story; but he did mean, if he could introduce the subject naturally, to say he wished to make some inquiries about a young lady who left Yorkshire two months ago, and in whom some of his friends were interested.

"Really, Lord Arden, your promptness is a pleasant surprise!" said Mr. Harding, shaking hands cordially with the young man. "I was very much afraid you would take no heed of my summons, for as a rule your family have never had a taste for business."

"Your letter sounded urgent," said Noel, frankly; "and I did a very foolish thing. My mother was bemoaning my abrupt departure, and to convince her it was needful I showed her your note, and she has been in terror ever since."

"She has not your calm."

"No. Of course I gathered at once more money would be needed before I was really free of those mines, but I have something left of my uncle's legacy, and I suppose if really needful a loan could be raised on the estate?"

Mr. Harding looked at him keenly.

"Five thousand will settle the matter."

"I can write you a cheque for that at once."

"I am glad to hear it. I should have been seriously troubled had you needed to raise money on the estates."

"Why?" asked Noel, lightly. "Should you have dreaded I was turning out a prodigal son? I assure you I am not a spendthrift. I got bitten with the speculation mania, and it has cost me pretty dearly, but I am cured now. My estates are free and unencumbered. I don't owe a shilling, so that, really, I think I have sold my wild oats pretty cheaply."

"I don't think you have anything of the prodigal son about you," replied Mr. Harding, with unusual earnestness; "but there are circumstances which make it most undesirable money should be raised on the Devenish estates; indeed, I should say it was well-nigh impossible—at any rate, without considerable delay."

"Well, I don't want to raise any," returned Noel, lightly; "but I had no idea there would be any difficulty about it. What's wrong with the estates? All the farms are let. Land can't be depreciating in value, or anything of that sort?"

"Not at all." The lawyer paused, and then introduced, as his listener considered, quite a different subject. "You may recollect, Lord Arden, there was another matter in which I wished to see you. I think I said as much in my letter."

"Yes. I told Lady Nora you were going to read me a lecture on the evil of my ways; but, seriously, Harding," and the young man laughed, frankly, "there's nothing much amiss?"

"No," returned the lawyer, quietly. "I think you've steered clear of the three dangers to youth—wine, women, and cards; but, nevertheless, I have something to say rather serious, if it sounds impertinent to you, my lord. I must ask you to remember that I am getting an old man, and I have been adviser to your family for over forty years. I have served three Lord Ardens of different generations."

"And been a loyal friend to all," replied Noel, heartily. "Mr. Harding, I don't think I could fail to take your advice in good part. What is it?"

"It is hardly advice so much as caution. I have received a most unpleasant letter concerning you, or rather concerning your affairs, and for your own interest there are certain questions I ought to ask you."

"Ask away," rejoined Noel. "I don't think I ever did anything yet I should mind the whole world hearing about," and then he coloured hotly as he reflected the "yet" was a necessary item of his sentence, since he cer-

tainly did not wish the whole world to know of the quest he was about to engage in.

"Were you at Arden Court when your uncle died? Did you see him in his last illness?"

Noel shook his head.

"I was in London at the time, had only gone up the next morning. As a matter of fact, Harding, my uncle had no what you would term 'last illness.' If you remember, he had been driving with my mother only that morning, and had retired to the library to read her letters. Half-an-hour later he was found dead. The doctor pronounced it heart disease, and said that he had warned the Earl it might prove fatal at any time. My mother was anxious to know if anything in the letters brought on the attack, but the doctor said it might have been, and probably was, the excitement of driving a spirited horse. My mother searched the papers eagerly for any clue, but every letter seemed most prosaic and common-place. I think you saw them yourself?"

"I did. Then you were away at the actual hour of the death; but I thought it possible you might have had some serious conversation with your uncle previously. He had been ailing for some time."

Noel looked surprised.

"I never had what is termed a 'serious conversation' with my uncle in my life. He was the best and kindest friend I could have had, but he was a very silent man. He lived as it were within himself, and confided his thoughts and feelings to no one, not even my mother, whom he dearly loved. I believe he was as anxious for my future as though I had been his son. I remember once he said he should have liked me to go into Parliament, but then he shook his head, and added gravely, 'though I know before you are of an age to do any good then you will be ineligible for the House of Commons.' My mother fidgeted rather about my prospects if he married, but I never gave the matter a thought. He told me I was as certain to become Lord Arden as though I had been his own son, and I believed him."

Mr. Harding looked seriously perturbed.

"I urged the Earl again and again to speak seriously to you. I told him he might be doing you a grievous wrong by keeping silence. The last time I saw him he promised me to follow my advice. A week later he was dead. Neither Lady Nora nor yourself ever alluded to the subject; but when you did not remark upon the very peculiar wording of Lord Arden's will, I felt sure you knew the truth. I may say I have fancied it was this knowledge kept you a single man."

"I know nothing but what the world is aware of," returned Lord Noel, frankly, "and I never noticed anything peculiar in the wording of my uncle's will. All his unentailed property he left to me. There was no need to mention the things that must fall to me as his heir-at-law."

The young man's utter unconsciousness of the blow which awaited him troubled the lawyer strangely; it made his task a hard one.

"Will you read this letter, Lord Arden?"

Noel took it a little suspiciously. A sheet of ostentatiously common paper, half covered with a crabbed, irregular writing, which he made out with considerable difficulty,—

"Sir,—Many years ago you came to St. Mildred's Church and paid down handsome to see the register and have some questions answered. You wanted to see the entry of the marriage of Alan Johns and Margaret Helen Disney, and that of the baptism of their child. When you went away you said you'd make it worth my while if ever I heard anything of Mrs. Johns or the baby to let you know. The years have gone on, and I'd well-nigh forgotten all about it till it was all brought back to me by a lady coming and wanting to see just those two entries. I made bold to ask her if she was a friend of Mrs. Johns, and what had become of the poor lady

and the child. She said they were dead; but I'm pretty certain by her manner that was a blind just to keep me off the track. She took a copy of the two entries, and a deal she seemed to think of them. Still she went away, and may be I'd have forgotten the whole thing, but yesterday I saw her with my very own eyes. I started so you might have knocked me down with a feather. 'Mrs. Johns,' said I, and then I remembered the poor thing I'd have been nigh on forty, and this young creature was a mere girl; but for all that I'm pretty sure it was her daughter, which I can prove to your satisfaction if so be you hold to your promise, and makes it worth my while.

"Your obedient servant,

"MICHAEL TENBY."

"What in the world has this to do with me?" exclaimed Noel, a little indignantly.

"Everything! Your uncle was privately married four months before his father's death under the name of Alan Johns. He and his wife lived abroad, whence he returned to attend his father's funeral. When the will was opened it was found that the old Earl, who almost worshipped his ward, Miss Leslie, had left all his fortune to her if his son refused to marry her. It amounted to three hundred thousand pounds, which he had been saving for years to free the estate from heavy mortgages. Had he forfeited this sum your uncle would all his life have been a pauper peer."

"But Miss Leslie was already married."

"Only she had not confessed the fact. Had she only done so two lives would not have been blighted. Your uncle yielded to temptation. I think he expiated it by years of remorse, but the act itself was cruel. He wrote to me detailing all the circumstances of his marriage, and asking whether, as it was contracted under a false name, it could not be set aside."

"And he was a Devenish!" cried Alan, bitterly. "How could he stoop to such a subterfuge?"

"That letter, by mistake, he posted to his wife, while I received the few careless lines announcing his continued absence, which should have gone to her. But for this mistake all might have been well, as Miss Lester soon announced her marriage, and so there was no longer any question of your uncle losing his fortune by not wedding her. I put the note aside, not guessing how far the affair had gone, and waiting till I could restore it personally to the writer; when, two days later, his wife called on me with the cruel letter I should have received, which had broken her heart."

"Then you saw her?"

"I saw her, and before she spoke knew that from her face she must be the child of the only woman I had ever loved. She told me the story, and asked me one question—was she his wife? I told her by the laws of Heaven and man she was Countess of Arden, and urged a reconciliation. It was in vain. She said her trust and faith were gone. She would rather beg her bread from door to door than take aught from the man who had so deceived her! For her mother's sake she agreed to become my guest. My sister took to her at once, and I hoped if she would not return to Lord Arden she might at least spend a peaceful life with us."

"Did he see her?"

"They never met again. She was dangerously ill for some days, and until I had her consent it seemed to me treachery to reveal her hiding-place to him. For her own sake, we tried to persuade her to return to him, and I think she took a fancy we meant to betray her. Anyway, she left us, and I have never seen her since."

"And my uncle?"

"He found out his mistake too late. When he had lost her he knew she was more precious to him than the wealth of Golconda. He sought her desperately, expending money like water in the quest."

"And in vain."

"Then came a note to him at last, saying she was well, and had sufficient money for her needs. She enclosed the certificate of her child's baptism, and begged him if he had ever loved her to leave her her little girl. What good, she asked, could a little unconscious baby be to him, while it was her one tie to life! Never while she lived, she wrote, would the child trouble him. If death released her, she would take care he knew that he was free to form an alliance worthy his rank."

"Poor woman!"

"Aye. Lord Arden was touched; he stopped the search and retired to Arden Court. He never heard any news whatever of his wife and child. As the years rolled on he took up the idea that both were dead. He believed this so firmly that he always thought of you as his legal successor. It was only when he gave me instructions for his will I learned he had kept the secret of his marriage even from Lady Nora and yourself. I begged and entreated him to tell you the truth, and at last he agreed. Had he lived only a few days longer I am convinced you would have heard his sad story."

There was a long, unbroken silence. Then Noel said gravely,—

"He never wronged me, so I must not blame him. He gave me every advantage in his life, and left me a sum which ought to have been sufficient provision for my whole life."

"He purchased Woodlake with the idea of its being your house. He believed his legacy would bring in three thousand a year; little enough for a belted earl, and yet all in his power to do for you. I fully believed you knew the truth, or I should have broached the matter sooner."

"I wish you had," said Noel, fervently, "then I should have been careful. Now I am a beggar!"

"Very far from that!" corrected the lawyer, "Woodlake is let to a good tenant, and brings in three hundred a year. It is settled on you and your heirs, so presents an unalienable inheritance. Then there would be no question of back-rents or anything of that kind, for so long as the Lady Fenella does not appear you have a perfect right to assume yourself your uncle's heir. The difficulty comes in, when you talk of raising money on the estate. You could not, knowing what we know, honourably take a loan from anyone on such security! In like manner if your married-to-morrow, though your wife would be undoubtedly Countess of Arden, you could make no settlement on her in accordance with your rank."

Noel looked bewildered.

"Do you really mean this story makes no other difference to me than that?"

"None. There is a codicil attached to your uncle's will which I did not think it needful to read publicly, which provides that until his daughter comes of age you are to keep up Arden Court and the other property in its present state, receiving the revenues for that purpose, and paying to Lady Fenella a liberal allowance for pocket money, her home being with your mother; but if on her majority she has failed to claim her rights, then search is to be made diligently for her; and from that time till she is found, or you receive proof of her death, you are to receive only half the revenues, the rest accumulating for her benefit. Thus, for two years and a half, your position is unchanged, excepting that if the poor girl claimed your help you would have to give her a home. She will be of age on the last day of June, eighteen hundred and eighty five; after which, I admit, your prospects will not appear very brilliant in the eyes of ambitious mothers. But, Lord Arden, if only you will be careful you might save a very pretty sum in the two years and a half before you. There is not the least need to take the world into your confidence. In your place, I should not even tell Lady Nora. She is of an anxious temperament, and would find the suspense hard to bear."

"It would kill her!"

"Come, it is not so dreadful as that. Besides, there is always the chance of your poor little cousin's death. I own, but for Michael Tenby's letter, I should have inclined to that belief myself. Her mother must have seen your uncle's death in the papers; and it seems incredible she should be content to let her daughter live in poverty while such a splendid inheritance awaits her."

Noel winced.

"Would it be absolute want? Harding, I feel like the despoiler of widows and orphans! Besides," he shuddered, "what kind of a mistress for Arden Court can be found in a girl who has been face to face with want?"

"It would not be that. Your uncle's wife had a little fortune of her own—something under two hundred a year, and she was a lady in feeling and education. It would be enough to bring up Lady Fenella quietly in the country. My own impression, however, in spite of the old clerk's letter, is that she went to America. She had been born and brought up in the States, and had many friends there."

Noel took up the letter again.

"You have seen this man? Is he to be depended on?"

"He seemed an honest enough fellow. But, recollect, his evidence rests only on memory. Could any man recognise a girl of eighteen from a likeness to her mother, whom he had seen but twice?"

Noel looked thoughtful.

"Three months ago I should have said 'no,' but I have learned lately it is possible for one sight of a woman's face to leave an undying memory. What puzzles me more is the account of the 'lady' who carried away a copy of the certificate. I can't think of any woman in the world who would feel any interest in the matter."

"I can."

"Whom?"

"Mrs. Watts."

Noel started, as he remembered what his mother had said of his interview with Miss Leslie.

"She has not the slightest relationship to our family. If I died to-morrow she would be no richer."

Mr. Harding smiled.

"I don't like Mrs. Watts," he said, drily. "I can never forget she was at the bottom of all the mischief. Had she only been honest enough to confess her own marriage, Lord Arden would never have broken his wife's heart!"

"Between us, what could it matter to her whether he left a wife and child?"

"Everything."

Noel shook his head.

"You are too clever for me, Mr. Harding. I can't follow your thoughts at all."

"I have a clerk," said the old lawyer—"in fact I have half-a-dozen—but one particular young man lives near the Watts's, and is fairly intimate with them. Don't imagine for a moment I am in the habit of gossiping about my clients; I am not quite so foolish, but I take a great interest in this young fellow. My sister makes a pet of him, and he comes pretty often to our house. He confided to my sister a month ago that the Watts's were in great excitement, for their second daughter was to be a countess! The day was not fixed yet, he ingeniously confessed, but he had his news from Mrs. Watts herself, so, of course, it was correct."

Noel flushed.

"The young lady is staying with us, and is undoubtedly very attractive; but the report of an engagement is utterly false."

"Or premature?"

"No; false. She is very pretty, but there is something about her I don't take to. My mother, I know, has set her heart on it; but if I know anything of my own mind it will never be."

"Well, I hope not."

"And you think Mr. Tanby's 'lady' was really Mrs. Watts?"

"I do. But I will be sure of it before long. She knew your uncle intimately, and it is quite on the cards he told her something of his secret."

"She hinted to my mother there was an entanglement abroad."

"Well, if I am right, she has had her suspicions all these years, but while Lord Arden lived they were useless. She is a clever woman, though she has never contrived to prosper. I expect it occurred to her her daughter Judith would be a very suitable wife for you; and that, in case you turned out a tardy wooer, it might be as well to hold a pretty little threat about producing a nearer heir to Arden Court in the background."

"The woman must be a fiend!"

"A prudent mother. She married into poverty herself, and wishes Miss Judith to do better. Really, Lord Arden, you and Lady Nora must be most unsuspicious people. Mrs. Watts has not troubled your family for eighteen years. She suddenly renews the acquaintance, and proposes a visit from her daughter, a beautiful and attractive girl. Take my word for it, the scheme was all mapped out beforehand."

"Well, it won't succeed," said Noel, quickly. "I would not marry Judith, even if the alternative were my mother's nightmare being fulfilled by my dying an old bachelor, and the name of Devenish becoming extinct!"

"And you are going back to the Court?"

"Not immediately."

"If you will take an old man's advice, don't go back until Miss Judith is safe at home."

"Surely, Harding, you don't think me weak enough to propose to her against my will?"

"I think Mrs. Watts is a scheming, unprincipled woman, and that you are no match for her."

Noel looked into the fire.

"I would rather my mother never knew the catastrophe coming on us. But, for my own part, I don't feel particularly cast down. By your showing, I may save something in the next two years. Then there is Woodlake to fall back upon; and I think I have rather a talent for managing land. Perhaps some absentee nobleman would make me his bailiff. Oh, it might be a great deal worse!"

Mr. Harding stared at him.

"I knew you were a Devenish, and no coward, but I never expected you to take the news like this. It seems to me you bear the loss of twenty thousand a year very easily!"

"Well, money isn't everything; and there are some cases when money is a decided drawback."

"I never heard of any."

"Well, we'll consider you mean to see Mr. Tenby and get all you can out of him. And now, Mr. Harding, I want your advice about another matter—something far more important."

"I don't see how anything can be that, Lord Arden; but I am quite at your disposal."

Noel paused. He wanted this man's counsel, and yet he doubted how to ask for it. He had a sensitive dread of ridicule if he detailed the whole circumstance; and yet, if he told too little, how could Mr. Harding help him?

He waited so long that the old gentleman marvelled. At last a light dawned on him, and he said suddenly,—

"I have guessed your riddle now, Lord Arden. I understand why you are so indifferent to fortune's favours. You have found out you have lost your heart, though how an old lawyer is to help you to regain it I have no idea."

"Right and wrong, Mr. Harding," said the young Earl, quickly. "I have lost my heart, but I have no intention of trying to regain it. What I want to find is something infinitely more precious—she who has stolen it!"

(To be continued.)

DRIVEN TO WRONG.

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CHAPTER XXV.

"BEST FOR YOU, AND BEST FOR ME."

"LAURENCE," said Mrs. Hilhouse, kindly. "I am sorry, for Nell's sake, that you are going away, and I shall miss you too. You have ever been kind and attentive to me. When you get to Market Glenton I think it would be as well for you to speak to my husband, but you must, of course, be guided by circumstances. I want you to understand, that, deeply as I sympathise with you both, and desire your happiness, I should not feel justified in keeping your mutual attachment from Mr. Hilhouse when we meet. You see, Nell is his daughter, as much as mine, and owes him the same duty."

"But not the same love," whispered the girl.

"You are quite right, Mrs. Hilhouse," said young Travers. "And if I see the faintest chance of being listened to, I will make a clean breast of it."

"It will be the best way, I think," returned the mother.

"And papa will say no, and we shall never be allowed to meet again," cried Nellie, passionately; "and I shall break my heart!"

"I hope it won't be so bad as that, my darling!" replied Mrs. Hilhouse, sadly. "But even if things do not go smoothly with you, you must try and act rightly; and you know that everything can be ordained for your happiness if permitted by a higher power."

"I do believe you would have taken it in that patient spirit, mother," said Nellie, admiringly, "but I can't. I know that papa has only to say yes, and I shall be happy, and no, to make me miserable."

"Well, dear, you can pray that his heart may be inclined to do what you desire."

Nellie shook her head.

"It's of no use, mamsy. I never knew my father's heart inclined one inch beyond his own way, and he is not likely to change now."

"Nellie! Nellie! you're naughty, my child!" returned her mother very sadly. "Take her away, Lawrence, and teach her to be more humble and submissive."

"So I will, my second mother," he replied, leaning over her, and pressing a kiss upon her brow. "I hope you will be feeling better."

She smiled at him in a strange way.

"I think I shall before long," she said, softly, and let him go.

Cecil followed him from the room.

"Travers," he said, "I want you to do me a favour, and to give you a piece of advice—the former first. My father went off in a very strange way to Market Glenton, and I'm afraid something is going wrong there. Let me know what it is in a private letter, there's a good fellow, but do not tell Nellie, if it regards Marion. I fear she may be ill, poor girl! My advice to you is that if you find the Rector in a bad temper, bide your time, for your only chance of Nell is his being in an amiable one when you speak to him, and in bringing good influence to bear to soften him. I had counted on my friend Mrs. Charlton to assist you, but I now learn that she is away. I want you to try and find out for me, where she has gone, and to let me know at once. I am most anxious to see her before I return to Gibraltar, and I have only one week before I must start. If you find out, telegraph to me; if not, write all you can learn. I promised my father to remain here till his return, and I must write to day to beg him to come back at once, or I shall be obliged to leave my dear mother with Nellie and Rose."

"They would take every care of her, would you not, Nell?" said young Travers to his sweetheart, who had joined them, holding her hand, and swaying her familiarly backwards and forwards.

"Of course we will. What do you suppose we did before you came? You can't think

papa is of any use in a sick room, surely, or comfort to an invalid?"

"Perhaps not," returned Cecil, thoughtfully. "But it seems right that there should be a masculine element to lean on, in case of emergency."

"That is quite a man's idea. I'd rather be without papa, than with him, myself. And now if you have done with Lawrence, I really want him to myself, for it is to be for such a very little time I am to have him."

"I'll undertake your commission with pleasure," said young Travers. "You can't send me to see Mrs. Charlton, can you? for I'm longing to make her acquaintance. I have heard such glowing accounts of her!"

"I wish I could. She has left Market Glenton, and I would give much to ascertain her whereabouts without loss of time."

"I'll bet there's one person in the parish who would ferret her out if you would make it worth his while," laughed Nellie.

"And who is that?" asked Cecil, eagerly.

"Samuel Diggs!"

"What! Is that awful creature still existent? No, thank you, Nell. I would rather wait Mrs. Charlton's own time to discover her, than expose her to the imperipence of the Market Glenton hypocrite. We will not put him on her track; and now, since you are so anxious to get rid of me, I will take myself off, Nell," and with a hearty shake of the hand to Laurence Travers, he returned to his mother's side.

Laurence kept his promise upon arriving at Market Glenton, and made all possible inquiries with reference to the young widow's whereabouts, and Marion's health, but with no good results as to the former.

No one knew what had become of Mrs. Charlton. He had called at the Rectory, and had seen Marion, but only in the presence of Mr. Hilhouse and his sister, so that beyond the fact that she was well, although looking pale, he could give Cecil no information; and he added, that from all accounts, things were not going on comfortably between Mr. Hilhouse and Mr. Gresham.

This letter Cecil kept to himself, and waited with impatience for his father's answer. It came in due course, telling him to rejoin his regiment at the expiration of his leave, without anxiety, as he should himself be at Mentone within a few days.

So Cecil prepared to leave his mother with a sad heart.

She seemed no worse, nay, she appeared better than when he had joined her. Still, he had a foreboding of evil, and a sadness was upon him which he could not shake off.

If his mother shared his feelings, she did not let him know it, and it was only when, at parting, she clung to him with tenacious arms, that he realized how bitter it was to her to give him up, and how little hope was in her heart, that they would meet again.

"Mother, darling!" he said, fervently, "if ever you want me, send for me, and I will manage to come to you, be assured."

Then she smiled at him with tear-dimmed eyes. He pressed her to his breast lovingly, and went his way—sad and dejected; and started on his journey to Gibraltar.

When he had left, and the nerve tension was over for Mrs. Hilhouse, she fell into one of those deep swoons, which were at all times so alarming. But her doctor was speedily summoned, and Nellie and Rose carefully attended upon her, and carried out his directions, and before long, consciousness was restored, and they were satisfied.

A few days afterwards, Mr. Hilhouse made his appearance among them; and after a prolonged conversation with his wife, to the astonishment of Nell, she had orders to pack up for their return to Market Glenton.

She could not conceal her surprise, for the doctor's orders had been that they should travel during the summer weather, and not return to the Rectory until the second winter should have been passed; but her heart gave

a bound of gladness at the news, for she would now soon see her lover again.

Mrs. Hilhouse, ever obedient to her husband's wishes, expressed her readiness to return with him at once; nay, more, she had heard all the story of Marion's delinquencies; and although she said nothing, knowing that opposition would only make the girl's father more stern towards her, she did not look at the matter in the same light as he did; and her heart was bleeding for her beloved daughter's sorrow, and she longed to try and comfort her.

No one in Market Glenton knew of Mrs. Hilhouse's return, until she was once more actually in her own house, and many were the warm welcomes which awaited her.

One of her first acts was to see Mr. Gresham; and if ever that young man's feelings were touched, it was by her gentleness, patience, and goodness; and when he left her, he had promised, with the Bishop's permission, to retire from the field, and leave her husband in undisputed possession of the parish.

About Marion she did not speak to him, being too rightly proud, to wish to obtrude her daughter upon any man.

Mr. Gresham repeated the conversation to the Bishop, and he, too, was touched, and set his mind to work as to how he was to carry out the gentle woman's wishes for the restoration of peace.

Suddenly it came upon him with an inspiration.

Mr. Gresham should leave Market Glenton, and without loss or detriment to himself. He would take him into his own house as chaplain or secretary until the living he had promised him should be vacant; and the proposition thoroughly tickled the vanity of the Rev. Faulkner, who most gratefully accepted the offer, and returned to Market Glenton in high feather, to make arrangements for his final departure.

It so happened that the Slowcombes had got up a concert in aid of a cottage hospital, which was to be held in the general assembly-rooms over the town-hall, and Mrs. Slowcombe had not only persuaded Mrs. Hilhouse to have tickets, but to let her take Marion there with her; for she, like every one else, had been sorry for the Rector's treatment of her at the schools, and rumours of his subsequent harshness towards her, were rife in the parish.

This concert had been got up before Mr. Gresham was aware that he was so soon going away, but he appeared at it, and took the opportunity of announcing the fact, while many of his hearers learnt the news with tear-laden eyes, and among these were Matilda Slowcombe, and Marion Hilhouse. Still they both felt a thrill of pride that the Bishop had so honoured him, while removing him from his present sphere, and looked at him with loving admiration.

Mr. Gresham had never appeared as a solo singer in public before; but now, for the first time, after making his farewell speech, he did sing, rendering that sweet haunting ballad, "In the Gloaming," with feeling, and as he gave utterance to those tender words—

"It was best to leave you thus, dear,
Best for you, and best for me!"

his eyes rested lovingly on Marion's face, and made her heart flutter wildly. That glance was his farewell to her. She had no other from him; but it was not needed to keep up her perfect faith in him. He was going away for her sake and his own, that he might perhaps make a home for her, and his look had told her of his constancy and love.

So spoke the heart which was true itself, and which could not doubt that of another.

The following morning Mr. Slowcombe having heard that the curate lately in charge, was about to go from among them, he thought it was time to ask that gentleman his intentions towards his daughter, as he appeared to hang fire in expressing them himself; and as soon as he thought he could decently do so, without

unseemly haste as to the hour of his call, he walked to the "Three Swans," where he found Mrs. Jenkins in tears, grieving for the departure of Mr. Gresham, who, she averred, was the pleasantest gentleman any one ever had under their roof, and she should miss him terribly!

Yes, Mr. Gresham really was gone, and there was no getting at him again. Gone—without even a morning call upon the parishioners who had been so hospitable and kind to him during his sojourn among them—who had followed his lead without question, and had almost bowed down and worshipped him!

Mr. Gresham could make no further use of them, so why should he trouble himself to pay a round of visits upon a number of stupid and uninteresting people, who would bore him excessively? So he went away; and the people of Market Glenton canvassed his conduct severely.

They thought it was anything but handsome treatment, after the way he had been received among them, and the current of feeling decidedly turned against Mr. Gresham, and one by one they straggled back to the fold, to the ineffable delight and satisfaction of Mr. Hilhouse, who really did his best to draw them to him.

His church, according to his own taste, was ruined; but the Bishop would not hear of the old square pews and wooden pulpit and lectern being brought back.

The cross he permitted to be returned to Mr. Gresham, and the old boards of commandments to be hung over the tessellated chancel, and Mr. Hilhouse made the best of what he could not help, and so things went more smoothly on; and people brought their troubles to their gentle sympathizer of yore, Mrs. Hilhouse, instead of going to confession behind the red baize door to the curate; and thus the summer passed away, with only one domestic disturbance to break its peace.

In the month of June, thinking that the troubled waters had once more become calm, Laurence Travers asked Mr. Hilhouse for his daughter Nellie, to the extreme indignation of that worthy, who positively declined so impudacious a man for a son-in-law, notwithstanding his own and Nellie's earnest pleading, and the added entreaties of his wife and Marion. All were in vain.

Mr. Travers was forbidden the house, and Nellie was desired to give up all intercourse with him, which she had no intention whatever of doing. Marion would have said so plainly.

Nell Hilhouse said not a word, and her father never dreamed but that his wishes were law to her; but they were not, and she and her lover held many clandestine meetings in the thick pine wood a mile outside the old town, little imagining that their stolen visits were known to anyone.

But they had one watcher—Samuel Biggs! He very often followed them; knew their place of rendezvous—the mossy bank where they sat clasped in each other's arms; and wondered how much he could get out of them, to keep their secret, or out of the Rector, for telling it to him.

For awhile he couldn't make up his mind which cask to tap, but finally he settled upon Nellie, and from time to time got her pocket-money out of her. Had she told Laurence, he would not have allowed her thus to be persecuted, but, as it was, she would not bother him with her petty worry, and preferred to bear it alone!

CHAPTER XXVI.

ELSIE'S RETURN.

THE unhappiness of both her daughters, the knowledge that the love of her only and beloved son was not running smoothly, and the general discomfort and restraint in the household, combined with her husband's anger, were too much for the gentle spirit of Mrs. Hilhouse, and the old alarming symptoms set in once more.

Dr. King expostulated with Mr. Hilhouse, but he positively refused to leave his parish again, saying that *his duty* lay there, but that his two daughters and Rose D'Arcy might accompany his wife wherever it was thought advisable for her to go, although, personally, he believed she would be better at home; and that if she were careful, and content to remain indoors, she would weather the winter all right. And this view of the case he placed before Mrs. Hilhouse, who heard it with a smile, and decided to remain.

In vain Dr. King combated her resolution.

"I am best at home," she said, gently. "It cannot last long, doctor, wherever I go; and I would rather we were all together."

"It is murder!" cried the doctor, indignantly. "My dear Mrs. Hilhouse, there is such a thing as giving way too much; the parish is of very secondary importance to you. You should make your husband go with you."

She shook her head.

"It's better as it is, doctor. I am very—very tired. The journey would be a great effort to me; and I shall soon be at rest now," and there was a strange, dewy look in Dr. King's eyes as he gazed down upon the emaciated form.

"I wish I could help you in any way!" he said, in a low voice. "Is there anything I could do?"

She lifted her eyes to his with sudden interest.

"I wonder if you can?" she answered. "I want very much to find Mrs. Charlton. She is such a favourite of mine, and such a splendid nurse. I should like to have her with me now very much!"

For a moment the doctor remained in thought, then he took his patient's hand with a smile.

"I think I can promise that she will come to you as quickly as steam-power will bring her," he replied, "for she is very fond of you and yours."

"Are you certain?"

"Quite, although she has not told me so in so many words with reference to those I include in the term *yours*."

"Doctor," said Mrs. Hilhouse, eagerly, "I know you are a true friend, and I can trust you; and you will, I am sure, help me to put matters straight, at least, for one of my children. Cecil is breaking his heart for Elsie, but something has come between them, though he knows not what."

"Well, it is his own fault," returned the doctor, vexedly. "Why didn't he tell her his feelings last Christmastide? I've no patience with him whatever!"

"I think he was jealous of Mr. Gresham," she said, sadly; "and you know what foolish things jealous people do?"

"I do, indeed. Jealousy makes a fool of a wise man, and a scoundrel of a foolish one. But Cecil ought to have known better than to be jealous of such a woman as Mrs. Charlton. As to Gresham, I wish he had never come near the parish. He has played the dickens with the health and happiness of my pretty little friend Marion. With regard to Nellie, she has chosen a very good sort of young fellow. Poverty is his only sin, and Hilhouse can well afford to help the young people if he likes. There, you have my opinion upon the case, my dear lady."

"I wish he would," Laurence Travers is a favourite of mine; and perhaps that will come right one day. I shall make it one of the last favours I ask, doctor. And I want to set things right for Cecil, too; but poor Marion's case is, I fear, hopeless, for, if I can judge rightly, she has given her love to a man without a heart."

"I fear so; she must try and live it down. Time is a great healer, but I am afraid Marion's affections are tenacious. She has a great deal of you in her character, my dear friend; and now, about that son of yours. Mrs. Charlton loves him truly, so why should he break his heart? I can gauge feelings and understand them as well as pulses, and I am

sure that Cecil's silence has caused the little widow pain and uneasiness, and I believe the Rector was at the bottom of her going away. She was never the same after his return here, and I chanced to pay her a visit after he had been with her, and found her so agitated and upset that I felt grieved for her."

"Oh! I hope not. What could he have said? He might have told her his wishes concerning Rose D'Arcy, perhaps!"

"Ah! he wanted to get up a match there, did he? Well, I am glad he has not succeeded. There is more power in Mrs. Charlton's right hand than in the whole of Miss D'Arcy put together."

"Rose is a nice child!" returned Mrs. Hilhouse; "we are all very fond of her. And now, Doctor, can you find Elsie for me?"

"I can. She has returned to England, and is living in the Isle of Wight. I will write to her as soon as I get home, and I will venture to say that she will be with you to-morrow or the next day."

"I shall be very glad to see her; her presence soothes me, and I hope her influence may be for good over my husband. It certainly used to be."

"It ought to be, unless he is made of adamant; but don't hope for too much in that direction. He was very bitter against her about Marion and Mr. Gresham."

"Ah! I'm afraid she was foolish over that!"

"I don't know; you must acknowledge it would be a good thing for the girl to be happily settled, and I do not think she in any way threw them together, although she made no obstacle to their meeting at her house. How could she know that Gresham was a heartless villain? He was apparently a credit to his sex!"

"Ah! it is useless to speak of it now he has spoilt my poor child's life. I suppose you share my opinion that he will never return to her!"

"I do, indeed, and she will soon know it herself now, for I heard this morning that he is engaged to the Bishop's eldest daughter. Old Slowcombe is storming about the town like a mad bull, and poor Matilda is in violent hysterics. They called me in to try and quiet her. I recommended a free application of cold water, and offended the whole family, so I returned home in disgrace!"

"Perhaps it is better so," replied Mrs. Hilhouse. "This news may touch my poor Marion's pride, and help her against herself. My heart aches for the poor girl."

"Well, do not make yourself worse, fretting, my dear creature. Try and cheer up, and Mrs. Charlton will soon be here to comfort you."

"Have you known where she was all along?" inquired Mrs. Hilhouse, in surprise. "And yet you never told me."

"How could I break the confidence she had reposed in me; and besides, you never before to-day told me you wanted her. Had you done so I should have acquainted her with the fact, as I will do now, satisfied as to the result; but I would not otherwise have given up her address when she did not wish it to be known."

"You are right, as you always are, doctor."

"If you think so you would go away when I tell you!"

"Not so, it is too late; my dear kind friend and doctor, surely—surely you must see it for yourself!" and she raised her eyes to his. "Tell me the truth?"

"It might—nay, I believe it would—prolong your life."

"How long?"

"I cannot say for certain, probably for months."

"And those months would be very suffering ones. No, doctor, let me take the rest I need so much, when Heaven sees fit to send it me."

"Amen!" returned Dr. King, reverently, and left the room, too upset for another word. Two days later Elsie Charlton was clasped in

Mrs. Hilhouse's feeble arms, and the bright head was pillowed on the sick woman's breast.

"Elsie," she said, softly, "I have so much to say to you, and so much I want you to say to me. Can you trust me, dear?"

"Indeed, indeed, I can," answered Mrs. Charlton, earnestly.

"That is well. Elsie, you have not inquired yet for Cecil, and he never writes; but he craves for news of you."

A flood of feeling rushed over the beautiful face; but the steadfast eyes never flinched from the keen regard of Mrs. Hilhouse.

"Ah! I thought it better not to do so," she replied simply.

"Why, Elsie?"

And there was silence.

"My dear, did you not tell me you could trust me? Have you and Cecil quarrelled, or what cloud has come between you?—for my poor boy has lost all his brightness, Elsie, and I fear he is very unhappy."

Tears were floating now in the earnest grey eyes.

"Oh, how sorry I am if he has suffered!" she said, fervently. "Would not Miss D'Arcy accept him—or what was it?"

"Miss D'Arcy! she never had the chance, Elsie. I thought you at least would have known that better than anyone else. My dear, surely you must be aware how very very dear you are to Cecil!"

The joyous expression which lit up Mrs. Charlton's face was answer enough, and Mrs. Hilhouse smiled back at her.

"Will you tell me what the cloud was, Elsie?" she asked.

"I was informed that Cecil and Miss D'Arcy were engaged, or about to be," she answered, turning very red.

"It was not the truth, dear! There was not the shadow of foundation in the statement, beyond the fact that Mr. Hilhouse greatly wished the match. Who raised such a mischievous report, Elsie? I fear it must have been someone who desired to advantage themselves by the falsehood!"

"You are right there, my friend," said Mrs. Charlton, with a strange smile, for she saw how very far removed from the right person were Mrs. Hilhouse's suspicions. For one moment the truth was upon her lips; the next she firmly closed them. Why should she shatter the dying woman's faith in the husband she had served so unselfishly for so many years? Let the delusion last; it would be cruel to undeceive her. "Will it satisfy you if I tell Cecil?" she asked, with a smile.

"Yes, my dear, if you would rather have it so," she answered, readily putting herself aside, as she had always done. "Thank you very—very much. And now, my darling, I want to know if you really care for my boy?"

"More than life," she cried, passionately.

"Oh! dear, Mrs. Hilhouse, I owe all to him—all the happiness I have known for years. Did he never tell you how he risked himself for me when I was deserted in an hotel in India? I shall never forget that moment of horrible awakening, when I found myself alone in the flames which had already burnt into my chamber. The next, all fear was passed, for your son stood before me, so calm and firm and quiet, and I felt that I could lean on his strength. I knew but little of him before that, dear Mrs. Hilhouse, but from that hour he was my truest friend, my best adviser, and I cannot tell you what the last six months have been to me without him."

"And they have not been less sad to him, believe me. So my brave boy saved you, Elsie! I am so proud of him," said the mother, with brightened eyes.

"Did he never tell you?" asked Mrs. Charlton, in surprise. "Did you not know of his bravery?"

"We heard some rumours of it, and questioned him about it, but he made very light of the affair."

"How like him! He was ever so modest

as to his own actions; but, dear Mrs. Hilhouse, his life was in imminent danger. He came through the flames to fetch me, and carried me back through them, the staircase burning and splintering beneath his feet. I am so proud of his friendship—you cannot tell how proud!" she said, with clasped hands and earnest face.

"And you may be proud of something else, his love; and Elsie, I want to see you reconciled and happy before I die."

"Oh! do not speak of dying, dear Mrs. Hilhouse! We could ill spare you. Let me try and nurse you back to better health?"

"No one could do that; and I am content that it should be so. Death is rather a friend than an enemy to the sufferer, and I am very weary, Elsie. If I can place your hand in my boy's, and know that he has you to look to for happiness, I shall die content; but dear! I think I should like you to wait a few months before you tell the Rector, for as I mentioned to you, his heart was set upon Rose for a daughter-in-law. I do not want anything to vex him when he is troubled at my loss, for, without vanity, I think I may say he must be troubled, for you see, dear, we have been together so many years, and no one understands him as I do."

"I will not forget your wishes, mother!" said Elsie, softly.

"It is sweet to hear you call me that, dear! You will be kind to Mr. Hilhouse for my sake, I know—will you not?" asked Mrs. Hilhouse, wistfully. "I am afraid he will miss me, and feel a blank when I am gone."

"He would not be human if he did not," retorted Mrs. Charlton, warmly.

"And you will be kind to him?" pleaded the wife.

He had brought unhappiness into Elsie's life, and caused her six months of bitter sorrow, and for a moment she felt unable to give the promise. Then she looked at the patient, worn face before her, and felt all that its owner had put up with for the past thirty years, and was ashamed of her own feelings of resentment.

"I will promise," she answered, and the two women sat hand in hand in silence.

Then Mrs. Hilhouse looked up at her.

"You will not leave me again, Elsie dear!" she said, softly, "and if ever you can help poor Marion, or Nell, you will, I know."

"I will, indeed."

"And Rose, you will try to like her too? She is an impulsive girl, with a warm, passionate heart. If ever unhappiness comes to her, you will remember I loved her."

"Yes."

"And now, Elsie, do one thing more for me. Write to Cecil at once, and beg him to come home. You will find paper and envelopes in that drawer. Give him my love, and tell him that happiness awaits him."

"Must I quite say that?" asked Mrs. Charlton, shyly, as she rose to obey Mrs. Hilhouse's commands.

But whatever she did say had the desired effect, for within a few hours of receiving Elsie's communication, Cecil Hilhouse was upon his homeward journey, with joy and sorrow mingling in his heart.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"FOR EVER AND FOR EVER."

It seemed as though Mrs. Hilhouse could not die until she had seen her dearly-loved son again.

Everyone moved around her with hushed voices, and stilled footsteps.

Elsie Charlton was with her day and night, taking the little rest she obtained upon a sofa in the sick-room; and in those days Mr. Hilhouse seemed quite to have forgiven her, and to lean upon her, as he could upon no one else in the household.

Occasionally Miss Hilhouse would appear in the invalid's chamber, and standing over

ker, with a hard face, deliver some severe and condemnatory texts; and having so done what she considered to be her duty, she would again retire, to the inexpressible relief of the dying woman.

"Oh! Elsie, I feel as though a black cloud over-spreads my sky when Mary Anne comes in like that," she said, in one of those her last days among them.

She did not suffer pain. Death was overtaking her very mercifully. She was only very tired, and looking forward to her rest. There seemed no active disease going on now, but her vital organs had no power to assert themselves.

No one could doubt the heavenly frame of her mind as they looked at the sweet, calm face, from which all traces of care had vanished, which made her appear quite young again.

Marion and Nellie spent the best part of their time kneeling at her side, or sitting at her feet, while Elsie administered to her comforts. The poor girls were almost useless, paralyzed by the dread of losing her.

Mrs. Hilhouse had told her wishes concerning Nellie to her husband, that he would permit the engagement when she was gone, and felt satisfied; for although he made her no promise, he had held her hand, and had bidden her not to distress her mind about anything.

Then Cecil arrived, and at the sight of him her face looked as though the noonday sun was shining athwart it.

Only Elsie chanced to be in the room with her when he entered, with a subdued joy upon his handsome and manly face, as he clasped the hand of the woman he loved and held it captive, while he knelt by his mother's side, and kissed her lovingly.

"I knew you would come, darling!" she murmured, smiling up at him.

"Of course, mother, and are you better, dear?"

"I soon shall be, Cecil—very soon now; only I so wanted to see you first, to know that Elsie and you are happy. You were a foolish boy to leave her without telling her what was in your heart. Had you done so no one could have made mischief between you. As it is, you have an enemy, Cecil. But he or she have done no permanent mischief, thank Heaven! And now here is my kind third daughter, ready to forgive you for any pain you have caused her." And she drew Mrs. Charlton towards her, and laid her second hand in that of her son.

"I know how you both love one another, my children," she continued; "may you both be blessed. Now, promise me that, whatever happens, you will never run away from each other again. And if troubles come to you let them draw you together, as they will, if you bear them hand-in-hand. Let there be no more clouds, Cecil, for Elsie is ready to fill your life with happiness if you ask her to do so. Call Marion, Cecil, and take Elsie away, and settle it all between you; and when it is done, come and tell me, and I shall be glad."

Marion was only resting in the dressing-room, and came willingly, greeting her brother with unusual tenderness, and he and Elsie went away hand-in-hand.

It seemed as though Cecil feared to let her go, lest she should vanish from his life, as she had done for the past six months. As for Mrs. Charlton, she showed no anxiety to get away, but walked by his side with a contented face.

When they reached the drawing-room he shut the door, and giving her no time even to cross the room he whispered, "Elsie, do you remember our parting, my darling? Shall our meeting be less warm?" And in another moment she was nestling on his breast, and his arms were encircling her.

"Can you forgive me, dear, for not telling you of my love before I left Market Ganton?" he asked, raising the bright face, and looking down upon it tenderly.

"Fully, Cecil! but why was it, love?"

"I could not bear seeing that fellow Gresham so much about you. That is the truth. I knew he would be a better match for you, and I wouldn't stand in your way. I determined to leave you free to choose between us, lest you should take me from any sense of gratitude, because I was once so happy as to be of service to you; or out of friendship, when your warmer feelings were given elsewhere; and I thought if you liked me best, when I returned from seeing my mother, what a happy time we would have! I laughed at my fears after that sublime moment of parting, Elsie, when I held you clasped to my heart, and knew that it beat true to me. I had not a doubt of your love after that; but I dared not leave my poor mother; and then I suppose you thought me heartless, Elsie, and were tired of waiting, for you ran away and hid yourself from me. I have no right to complain, darling; but the time has been a sad and weary one to me. And now, *mignonne*, will you give me the right? Elsie, I have loved you ever since we first met, right or wrong. I loved you, darling, although I felt bound in honour not to tell you so. But now you are free, thank Heaven! and you have outlived the days of your supposed mourning. I think I have been patient, Elsie—as patient as any man could be whose whole heart was full of love for you. Do you not say so too, dear?"

"Shall I tell you what I really think?"

"Do, little one."

"Well, the only fault I have to find with you is that you have been too patient," she answered, wickedly.

He caught her to his breast impetuously.

"Elsie, I wish you had said that when first I came home!" he cried, joyously. "My darling, darling love, you shall never complain of that now! For henceforth you are mine, and mine only!"

"Is that not a case of taking possession?" she said, playfully. "I never said that, you know?"

"Did you not?" he asked, holding her from him, and looking into the sweet, flushed face. "Did you not? Then, Elsie, answer me, and tell me—do you love me?—and will you give me the right to care for you for ever?"

She raised those powerful grey eyes to his, full of the light of love.

"Like yourself, Cecil, I have loved long—loved you since you faced death for my sake, and saved the life deemed valueless to others! Oh, Cecil! my heart went out to you with one glad bound! Glad, not because my life was saved, but because I knew then that there was one noble and unselfish man in the world, which I had bitterly begun to doubt. The very fact that you breathed no love words to me, doubled my esteem for you, and set you apart in my heart from all the rest. And yet, was it vain of me to think so? I felt certain that you did care for me, and that I was all the world to you, as you were to me!"

"No, Elsie, there was no vanity in feeling that there was a strong though unspoken affinity between our hearts. I ever felt the same."

"Until you became jealous of Mr. Gresham?" she answered, happily.

"Well, pet, I heard on all sides that he was such a *rara avis*, how could I tell? I suppose it was jealousy or modesty on my part. I scarcely think one can analyse one's feelings at all times."

"Well, we will call it *modesty*, Cecil; it is altogether a prettier name. And it was very unselfish of you to wish to give Mr. Gresham the chance of getting me; but, I assure you, he did not avail himself of it," she said, a little chaffingly.

"My bad temper did not last long, Elsie. I meant to come back to say all this to you from the hour I left you."

"Only you didn't."

"No, love! But had you known how my poor mother leaned on me, you would not blame me."

"I do not, Cecil. I never grudged you to dear Mrs. Hilhouse, much as I wanted you myself."

"Did you really want me, Elsie?" he inquired, tenderly.

"Really, with every beat of my heart I longed for you."

"My darling! if I had only known!" he cried, passionately. "Nothing—nothing should have kept me away from you!" and a flood of soft feeling passed over the handsome face.

"That was what I was afraid of, Cecil, lest I should take you from your mother, and perhaps make her worse."

"She is totally unselfish, Elsie. She would have sent me had she known."

"I am sure of it; so I tried to be unselfish too," she answered, softly.

"And then you ran away!" he said, with an accent of reproach in his voice. "Come and sit beside me on the sofa, Elsie, and tell me what imp of mischief possessed you to hide yourself from your poor old Cecil. You knew I loved you, darling, even though I had not told you so in so many words! And I think you must know that if once I love I do not change?"

She let him lead her across the room, and accepted the seat by his side, but sat silent, not liking the painful task of explaining, yet feeling that, in justice to herself, she must tell the truth.

"Cecil," she said, after a pause, "I refused to tell your dear mother; but I am constrained to let you know everything; only I want your promise never to let her or the girls know?"

"You have it," he replied, wonderingly. "My darling, my poor mother spoke of an enemy. Did any one really try to make mischief between us?"

"I fear so, and that is the painful part of it, for Cecil it was your father!"

Captain Hilhouse started up.

"My father dared to do that! Elsie, you will let me speak to him about this. My promise does not bind me there!" he said, excitedly.

"Perhaps not your promise, Cecil; but my wishes will bind you, at any rate for the present. There must be peace in the house during your dear mother's last days with us, and when she has gone to a happier home, and left desolation behind her, it will then be no time for heartburnings and reproaches. Moreover, I have promised Mrs. Hilhouse to let some months elapse before announcing our engagement. Dearly as I should like never to leave you again, Cecil, some time must go by before we can be married, for we must not shut our eyes to the fact that your dear mother's hours among us are numbered. She has only tried to live that she might meet you again, and see us happy. That accomplished, she will not even try to live, but will yield up her gentle spirit to Him who gave it."

"Oh! Elsie, do you think we must part with her so soon?" he asked, in a tone of anguish.

"Very very soon, I fear, dear," she returned sadly. "And oh, Cecil! was it not good and loving of her to send for me to nurse her? I have been so happy in her society, believe me; she has been so gentle and sweet and kind."

"But my child, how did she know where to find you? Had she been aware of the place of your retreat, she would not have been long in informing me of it."

"Neither of you consulted my good friend, Dr. King," she answered, with a smile. "or you might have discovered it sooner. However, all's well that ends well, and I am glad that the kind thought came from Mrs. Hilhouse. It will ever be a happiness to me that such was the case; and that if one of your parents was the means of my going away, the other was, of bringing me back; so we must try and forgive one for the other's sake."

"It will be hard to me to forgive anyone who in anyway tried to part you from me, Elsie," he said, sternly, the soft expression vanishing from his face. "But you have yet to tell me the lever he used for the purpose. What was it, my darling?"

"Rose D'Arcy!"

"Why, what could he say about her, Elsie? And when did he speak to you of her?"

"At the time of the Gresham rebellion, when he returned to Market Glenton."

"But, darling, he spoke to me about his ward, long before that, and told me he would like me 'o marry her."

"And you answered?" she asked, eagerly.

"That when I married it would be for love only, and that Miss D'Arcy could never be anything to me."

In a moment her arms were about his neck.

"My own true Cecil!" she murmured. "how could I doubt you? I might have known! I might have known!"

"Did you doubt me, Elsie?" he inquired, a little sadly. "I am sorry for that."

"Oh! Cecil, how could I help it? How could I imagine that your father, a clergyman, and one upheld as a good and holy man, could so deceive me?" she replied, with emotion.

"Elsie, tell me all the truth. What did he say to you?" he inquired, painfully.

"He asked me to promise not to influence you against Rose, for she was all he could desire for your wife, and he hoped and believed you would very shortly be engaged to her, and he added that her fortune would make you comfortable, whether you elected to remain in the service, or to leave it; and, Cecil, I knew that I had not a sixpence wherewith to help you, so—so, I went away! And oh! my dear, I was so very, very miserable in my uncertainty, and I longed for you every hour of each day as it passed by."

"Well, darling! we have both of us let a wee bit of mistrust creep into our hearts. I fear. Let us promise that I shall be for the last time. As to my father, I will follow out your wishes; but some day he must render me an account of his unjustifiable assertion."

"He spoke as he desired, Cecil, and no doubt satisfied his conscience that he did not state your engagement was a *fait accompli*, but as a hoped-for event, which might be looked for with certainty."

"I see no difference myself. It was told you with the intention to deceive. He could not imagine that I should ever marry Rose?"

"I am not so sure of that. I believe he thought that if all obstacles were removed—"

"Meaning you, little one?"

"Yes! meaning me. But it is all over now, and I will sign and seal the compact of mutual faith and trust."

"For ever?"

"For ever and for ever!" she returned, earnestly, and lifted her lips to his.

And thus the compact was signed and sealed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DISCONSOLATE AND INCONSOLABLE WIDOWER.

WHEN Cecil and Elsie returned to Mrs. Hilhouse they found her bright eyed and excited; but when they knelt beside her, and told her of their mutual happiness, she seemed content, and told them how glad their news had made her, and lay holding a hand of each, until she fell into a heavy sleep.

From that sleep she awoke only once and told Cecil how thankful she was to have him near her. After which she relapsed into slumber, from which she awoke in Paradise, her earthly clay lit up with so seraphic a smile upon her face that no one could doubt the perfect peace which had come to her, after her long and faithful service here on earth. The trials and troubles of life were over, and she had found that reward promised to the pure in heart.

Cecil felt his mother's death keenly—very

keenly—for he had loved her deeply. But even this great sorrow could not shut out the joy of Elsie's love from his heart, and she was to him a very tower of strength in his hour of trouble; in fact, she was a tower of strength to them all.

The poor shricking, trembling girls clung to her in this their first acquaintance with death. It seemed so awful to them their ever tender mother should thus be with them, and not of them; that they had no power to look beyond the still form, and find comfort in the thought of the perfect rest which had come for her.

Their characters were very differently shown at this time.

Marion was pale, and still, and quiet, and although despair had settled in a black cloud upon her spirit, she in no way railed against the God who had both given her such a mother and taken her away; while Nellie, whose untutored mind could not brook sorrow, bewailed her loss in wild words, which led people to think she mourned more than her sister, which was not the case.

It seemed as though Mr. Hilhouse had never realized that he really was to lose his wife.

He was not even in the house when she passed away, and when Mrs. Charlton broke the news to him, he, like the rest, clung to her as though he had been a child. In fact, he was a disconsolate, inconsolable widower.

He appeared to be an utterly changed man, depending upon others as he had never done before; and shricking from solitude, he was now always in the family circle. Nor would he hear of Mrs. Charlton returning home at present to the "Nest."

They all at that time forgave him the past, for the sorrow he showed for the wife he had lost, who, up to now, they had considered he had oppressed, and not appreciated as he should have done; and believed they had done him an injustice regarding the depth of the love he had borne her.

As to Rose D'Arcy, she seemed to feel Mrs. Hilhouse's death as though she had been her mother. She was an excitable girl, with warm, quick feelings, and she sorrowed with those around her, making their grief her own.

Most especially she was gentle and kind to Mr. Hilhouse, caressing him, comforting him, running his errands, and trying to amuse him.

And the idea she had once conceived of him, that he was hard and cold, vanished, and filled her with regret that she had ever thought him so; and thus, in her penitence, she raised him to a pedestal he little deserved.

Although, for the time being, the death of the woman who had so long been his patient slave, and the great blank her loss made in his life, changed and softened him, and even Nell regretted her many hard speeches concerning him and the nature of his love, while Mrs. Charlton was touched into real forgiveness and liking, by his being so disconsolate.

As to Mr. Hilhouse himself, he would allow no one else to make a single arrangement for his wife's funeral. The consequence was, that it was one of those painfully black sombre affairs, which make sorrow doubly grievous, and which speak of no hope.

The only person who showed no feeling, nay, who seemed almost to enjoy the sadness that reigned in the house, was Aunt Mary Ann. She was constantly at the Rectory, and as constantly brought an uncomfortable atmosphere into the household, as well as her knitting and the communion service.

If there was a thing Miss Hilhouse liked, it was a funeral—not a modern one, but one with nodding plumes, and velvet pall.

The family said nothing, although the arrangements grated upon their feelings; but Cecil felt really indignant when he found Samuel Biggs had taken up the position of a "mute" before the door, and did speak to his father upon the subject.

(To be continued.)

SWEET CHRISTMAS TIME.

—o—

Oh, Christmas chimes! oh, Christmas times!

The sweetest and the brightest:
When hearts beat high and pulses fly,
And childhood's steps are lightest;
When ruddy cheeks are ruddiest,
And red lips like a cherry.

Oh, Christmas near—oh, Christmas here—
So sparkling and so merry!

King Christmas—and with ample cause,
For children all adore him—
While they're asleep, takes many a peep—
At little beds before him;
And then he laughs—not in his sleeve,
For that is full, believe it,
Of Christmas toys, for girls and boys,
And could not well receive it.

The good old man will plot and plan
Like any great commander,
Or swim deep seas—the young to please—
As did the brave Leander.
Not only packs of jumping-jacks
Adorn his ample shoulders,
But hats and boots, and stylish suits
Astonish all beholders.

Oh, Christmas bells! your music tells
A tale of joy and gladness—
Of fireside peace, of sweet increase—
And not a tale of sadness;
For even Poverty lifts up
Her thousand thousand voices,
And for this time—this one bright time—
Of goodly cheer, rejoices.

M. K.

LADY LILITH.

—o—

CHAPTER VIII.

FOR some days after this, neither husband nor wife spoke to each other, except, indeed, at meal times, when—with a view to the curious eyes of the servants—they made those conventional remarks that mean just nothing at all.

Each, however, knew that this was armed neutrality that could not last, and each feared that the next movement of the other would widen the breach between them.

One afternoon, three or four days later, Lyndhurst entered his wife's boudoir, and she was the more surprised, as it was the first time he had been there since their marriage.

"Lilith," he said, "there is a visitor on horseback coming up the avenue. It is Sir Horace Dalton!"

"Well?" she said, interrogatively, a faint carnation showing under the creamy pallor of her skin.

"I wish to know," Lyndhurst continued, slowly, "what you intend doing?"

It was a minute before she replied. A battle was raging in her breast, but the scales balanced very evenly between a wilful desire not to own herself vanquished, and the wish to show Lyndhurst that she recognized some degree of reason in his demands. Looking up, she met his eyes fixed upon her, and there was something in the gaze that roused her latent opposition.

"I intend showing Sir Horace the same courtesy that I should extend to any other guest!" she answered, defiantly.

"Then, in the face of what has passed before, you still purpose receiving him?"

"I do."

"And defying my authority?"

"If you like to put it so—yes!"

Without another word Lyndhurst went to the bell, and struck it sharply.

"When the servant comes I am going to tell him that you receive no visitors to-day," he observed, quietly; "and as I am sure you

desire no altercation before him, I know you will not attempt to contradict me."

"What!" she exclaimed, passionately, "you would degrade my authority before your servants?"

"On the contrary, I should wish to preserve it, and if you choose you can give the order yourself. But remember, I am not to be trifled with!"

"You rang, my lady?" said the footman, opening the door; and there followed a perceptible pause before Lilith answered.—

"Yes. If anyone calls I am not at home."

The servant bowed and retired, and then Lilith turned to her husband.

"You have conquered this time, but—I can hardly congratulate you on your victory!"

"And yet—I am satisfied with it."

"Probably. If I were a man I do not think I should care for a triumph over a weak woman who was entirely in my power."

The taunt brought a hot rush of blood to the young man's brow, but he restrained the words that trembled on his lips, and left the room in silence.

There was not much of the victor in his appearance. He had taken the only course which he deemed consistent with his honour, but it seemed to him he would rather have cut off his right hand, than listen to those scornful words from his wife's beautiful lips. If he had really gained a victory, it had been lost in the winning.

As for her, a strangely complex feeling took possession of her after he had left her, and it was not wholly anger at the course he had pursued. Hitherto, she had regarded Lyndhurst as a man who had too much respect for herself and her rank to assume any degree of authority over her; and even when he had first threatened to exclude Dalton from the house, she had hardly imagined that he really meant what he said.

But he had proved that he *did* mean it, and had shown at the same time an insistent determination which bore witness to his strength of will. Certainly the scene of the afternoon had made her respect him the more; for, to a woman of her imperious disposition, nothing challenges admiration so much as that courage which carries its point, no matter what opposition it may have to contend with.

When dinner time came she was conscious of a certain suppressed excitement at the thought of meeting Lyndhurst. She wondered how he would greet her, whether he would continue his masterful manner, and whether he would make any allusion to what had passed between them.

When she entered the drawing-room he was not there, and five minutes—ten minutes—passed, and still he did not come. She began to grow impatient—disappointed. Was he keeping away on purpose, because he did not wish to meet her?

A tap at the door was followed by the entrance of Lyndhurst's valet, Streeter—a thin, dark, foreign-looking man, who went about the house as if he were shod in velvet.

"My master has sent me to express his regret that he will not be able to join you at dinner, my lady," said the valet, who spoke with extreme deliberation, and prided himself upon his good grammar. "He is slightly indisposed, and is resting on the couch in the study."

"Indisposed! What! is [the matter with him?"

Streeter hesitated. Lyndhurst had told him to make as light of the matter as he could, but he had not told him to hide the truth supposing Lady Lilith wished to hear it, and the valet found himself in a dilemma.

"It is nothing serious, my lady. Doctor Symes says he will be quite well in a day or two."

"Has the doctor been here, then?" Lilith asked quickly. "When did he come?"

"About an hour ago, my lady. He has set the bone, and declares there is no occasion for anxiety."

Lilith grew rather pale, thereby surprising Streeter, who, in common with the rest of the servants, regarded his mistress somewhat in the light of an animated statue.

"Did your master hurt himself last night, then?" she asked, struck by a sudden idea, which happened to be correct.

"Yes, my lady. He injured his shoulder."

To the valet's intense astonishment her ladyship swept past him without another word, and made her way straight to Lyndhurst's study. At the door she paused, and instead of opening it, as she had impulsively intended doing, she knocked gently against the panel.

"Come in!" said Lyndhurst's voice, with an accent of pained weariness.

He was lying on the couch, a table laden with books and newspapers at his side. The hanging lamp shone full upon his face, which looked white and worn in the softly shaded light.

His expression changed as he saw his wife standing there tall, and graceful, in her black lace robes, with a trailing spray of yellow roses reaching across the front of her corsege from shoulder to waist.

A half bashful timidity was visible in her attitude, as if she were not quite sure of the reception she might expect.

"May I come in?" she said, softly. "Streeter brought me your message, and—and—I wished to assure myself that there was really no more the matter with you than he said."

"That was very good of you," he returned, raising himself into a sitting position, while she closed the door and came to his side, "but there is really no occasion for anxiety. Symes put the bone straight when he was here a little while ago, and the pain made me feel faint, so I thought I would spare you the sight of my invalid face at dinner."

He smiled as he finished speaking, but she was sharp enough to see that the smile was forced, and that, as a matter of fact, he was still suffering.

"Let me make the cushions more comfortable for you," she said, still in the same gentle voice—so unlike her usual tones that he hardly recognised it. "There—is not that better?"

"Much better," he responded, leaning back, and wondering how it was that even now the mere sense of her presence had power to make the blood course like quicksilver through his veins.

It seemed to him that the pain he had endured was almost redeemed as she bent over him, her soft, white hands touching his hair as she moved the cushions, and the subtle perfume of her roses floating up to him with an intoxicating sweetness that haunted him long afterwards.

He closed his eyes, and it seemed to him for a moment as if he were dreaming. When he opened them they rested on her sweet, pale face, with the lovely violet eyes pitying and tender as those of an angel.

"It is I who am the cause of your pain," she said, tremulously. "I wish I could tell you how grieved I am. If I could do anything—"

"You have done a good deal already," he returned, as she paused. "You have given me your sympathy, and that is more than my very small indisposition deserves. Now," he added, remembrance coming to him as the great gong in the hall announced that dinner was served. "I think you had better leave me, or else, I fear, your soup will be cold—and that is a hardship which invariably tries my equanimity!"

"And what about your dinner—have you had it?"

"No. I don't feel in the humour for eating. I shall have a cup of coffee brought in to me presently."

"But that is not the way to get well!" exclaimed Lilith, who was a born nurse, and who had forgotten the disturbing events of the afternoon in her rush of sympathy. "Wait a moment—I will be back presently."

She left the room, and ten minutes later a dainty little repast was sent up to Lyndhurst on a tray, followed by his wife.

"There!" she said, taking the cover off the plate, and drawing the table a little closer to his side. "I have worked so hard at the pheasant in order to cut the breast off for you, without mangling it too much, that you must eat it if only to let me know you appreciate my efforts!"

Lyndhurst could hardly credit the evidence of his senses. His wife was revealing a phase of her character whose existence he had not even suspected; and it was difficult, indeed, to reconcile this gentle, womanly creature with the imperious princess who had defied him a few hours ago. He felt that her nature must be a species of Sphinx, whose secret he would never discover.

And yet the solution was simple enough. In the knowledge that her husband was suffering from the effects of the desperate efforts he had made to rescue her the previous evening, Lilith felt that the least return she could give would be to do her utmost to alleviate his pain, and, curiously enough, she experienced an actual pleasure in tending him. It seemed to her as if she were paying back part of the debt she owed him.

Lyndhurst insisted on her going to dinner and leaving him for awhile; but she turned round when she reached the door, saying,—

"I shall come back by-and-by—that is, if you will let me?"

His heart beat like a boy's under the influence of her magic gaze.

"I shall be only too pleased, if you won't find my companionship too depressing."

She was not away very long, although when she returned he had finished his pheasant, and the tray had been removed. The room looked bright and cosy in the lamplight, the fire shining on the books and pictures, and guns and swords, and fishing tackle, that formed a heterogeneous mixture on the walls. He followed her glance round and smiled.

"Are you amused at the works of art by which I have surrounded myself? There are one or two good prints, if you care to look at them."

She made a tour of the room, and was evidently interested in its contents. It was a long time since he had seen her look so animated, and he wondered at the spell that had wrought the change.

"Why, here is a guitar!" she exclaimed, presently, in some surprise. "Do you play it?"

"Yes, a little."

"And you sing as well? I had no idea of it."

Their eyes met, and both looked slightly conscious, as if each knew that the same thought had struck the other. Lilith remembered that she had hitherto taken so little interest in her husband that it had been a matter of perfect indifference to her whether he cared for music or not.

"Shall I sing to you?" she said, rather hastily, and with the air of one trying to put away some disagreeable reminiscence. "It is so long since I have sang anything that it will be quite a novelty to me."

She seated herself on a low pile of cushions on the hearth-rug, and drawing her fingers across the strings of the guitar, struck a few chords, then broke into a pretty little French song, bright and melodious. Her voice was sweet and clear, a pure soprano, that had been well cultivated by the best London masters, and she sang with exquisite taste and expression.

While he watched her, Lyndhurst resolutely put away all saddening thoughts, and yielded himself entirely to the influence of the moment. Just then, a feeling that was almost happiness came to him, together with wild hopes of a future that even yet might bring redemption for the past.

The firelight played on the rich masses of her hair, and brought out innumerable starry points of light from the diamonds round her

throat, shedding a new radiance on the fair, downcast face, which looked so strangely subdued in the flickering shadows.

"Go on, please go on!" he exclaimed, as she ceased singing, and she immediately obeyed.

This time she selected a different kind of song—a sad lament for a lost love, in which her voice swelled out with inexpressible pathos. After she had finished she let the guitar fall on the rug at her feet, and for a few moments a silence fell upon her, as she looked half yearningly into the red heart of the fire.

She herself was touched by the music—or was it by the thoughts to which the music had given birth? All the sadness, the misery of her own lot and Lyndhurst's, had rushed upon her; and somehow, this evening, she saw it in a new light—comprehended that not one man out of a thousand would have treated her so generously as he had done after knowing the injury she had inflicted upon him.

Acting, as usual, upon impulse, she came over to his couch, and knelt by his side; and as she lifted her long-fringed lids, she saw that the lovely eyes were misted with tears.

"What is the matter?" he asked, in quick alarm, but she reassured him by a tremulous smile.

"Nothing. I have only been thinking that—that—" she hesitated, but after a moment's pause swallowed her pride, and went on bravely, "that you have been very forbearing with me since our marriage. Wait, let me speak," as he attempted to interrupt her. "I know now what a fatal mistake our marriage was, and I also know that I have been deeply to blame. Still, the marriage cannot be undone; and it seems to me that we have hardly tried to make the best of the position. You decreed that we should be strangers. Can we not alter that decree, and try to be—friends?"

For a moment Lyndhurst was silent—both from surprise and agitation.

"I know," she went on, still with the same strange humility, "that I cannot fulfil many of the duties of a wife towards you, but I will strive to take some interest in your pursuits. I might even walk and drive with you occasionally, and by so doing render your life a little less lonely; that is," she added, hastily, "always supposing you would care for my society."

It seemed to her hours before he answered, although the clock on the mantelpiece only registered five minutes in reality. It was with some difficulty that he controlled his voice sufficiently to reply.

"You are wiser than I, Lilith, and I gladly accept your proposition. We will, as you say, be friends; and for both of us, life will seem a little brighter than it has been of late. Shall we shake hands on the compact?"

She put her hand in his without hesitation, and he pressed it for an instant before letting it go. But all the same, a feeling of unreality pursued him; and he feared, lest in the morning, the spell that had subdued his wife into such sweet graciousness might be broken, and the old barrier of coldness and hauteur rise between them, impassable as heretofore.

CHAPTER IX.

LYNDHURST'S fears were without foundation. It was merely a caprice on the part of Lilith that had made her act as she had done, it was one destined to endure for some time, indefinitely as it seemed; for she nursed her husband with the most careful solicitude until he was quite convalescent, reading to him, singing for him, and occasionally driving him out in her own little pony carriage.

It was wonderful what a change this new programme wrought in them both—wonderful too, how the unrestrained intercourse drew them together. Lilith was constantly finding something to wonder at and admire in her husband, and she discovered that he had not

only travelled, but had benefited by his travels, inasmuch as he had studied human nature in its various phases, and enlarged his mind as much by observation as by extensive reading. Conversation with him was very interesting, much more interesting than she had deemed possible, and she grew at last to take a certain pride in her husband—unconsciously it is true.

Neither of them ever adverted to the past, or to the peculiar relations existing between them. They were friends—nothing more, and nothing less—and each seemed content.

Of the fact that there was, in effect, no confidence between them neither seemed aware; but one morning it was brought home to Lilith rather forcibly, and, strange to say, it caused her something more than annoyance.

She had entered the breakfast-room rather earlier than was her usual custom, and Lyndhurst was still loitering about the garden. It was a fine October morning; the sun had pierced through the autumnal mist, and was glittering on the heavy dew that beaded the lawn, and the tall dahlias nodding their stately heads in the border. The trees were gorgeous with golden and ruddy tints, and the virginian creeper veiling the side of the house glowed in all the splendour of its scarlet decay. But, in spite of the sunshine, the air was chilly, and the blazing fire of cherry wood logs on the hearth was both pleasant looking and comfortable.

The breakfast-room was a long, rather low apartment facing the south, and opening through French windows on to the lawn. Lilith was standing near one of the latter, watching her husband's tall well-knit form as he sauntered slowly up the path, when a footman brought in the post-bag, and as she was expecting a letter from Lady Lester she did not wait for Lyndhurst, but proceeded to open the bag, and empty out its contents.

Oddly enough, there was only one letter for her, and one for her husband, and as she put the latter on his plate a faint odour of violets came from it, and caused her to look at it rather attentively. The envelope was a small square one, directed in a woman's handwriting—a delicate Italian hand, such as is taught now in second-rate boarding schools.

Somewhat ashamed of her curiosity Lilith turned away, and at that moment Lyndhurst entered through the open window.

"Good morning! You have opened the post-bag, I see," he said, gaily.

"Yes, and your correspondents have evidently neglected you, for there is only one letter for you."

He took it up, looked at the writing, and then opened it. In spite of herself, Lilith could not help watching him, and it was with a sort of sinking at the heart that she saw the eagerness with which he perused those closely-written lines.

Evidently they were interesting, for he went to the window and read the letter over again, and when he came back to the table he looked moody and preoccupied.

"You have had no bad news, I trust?" said Lilith, as she seated herself before the glittering silver coffee set.

A dark red flush leapt into Colin's cheek.

"No—thank you."

He did not, as she hoped he would, mention from whom the letter had come, and she felt annoyed—as much with her own involuntary curiosity as with his reticence on the subject.

"If I stood in the same relation towards him as most wives towards their husbands I should be inclined to feel jealous," she thought to herself, and then tried to dismiss the remembrance from her mind, and interest herself in her own letter—which was not from her aunt, but from Lady Westland.

"There are to be some private theatricals at Westland Chase at Christmas," she observed, after a lengthened pause, "and Lady Westland wants me to take part in them. Shall I accept the invitation?"

It was with a visible effort that Lyndhurst

ronsed himself from the reverie into which he appeared to have fallen.

"What did you say?"

Lilith repeated her question rather impatiently.

"Oh, certainly! Accept by all means if you wish!" he returned, somewhat to her surprise, for she knew that Sir Horace Dalton would probably be present at the theatricals, and had fancied that, for this reason, her husband might decline the Westlands' hospitality.

"He is still so interested in his letter that he has perhaps forgotten all about Sir Horace," she thought rather bitterly, but this was far from being the case.

Lyndhurst knew perfectly well that in going to the Chase his wife would be thrown into Dalton's society, but his generous nature would not allow him, under present conditions, to avow any suspicions with regard to her loyalty; and if she wished to join in the coming festivities he would not make so poor a return for the friendship she had proffered as to forbid her following her inclinations.

It is true he had refused to entertain the Baronet beneath his own roof, but since then he had come to a fuller understanding of his wife's character, and his faith in her had grown deeper. With him—"unfaith in aught is want of faith in all!"

All that morning, Lilith struggled hard with the vague sense of uneasiness that pursued her, and after luncheon, partly with a view of escaping from her own thoughts, she said to her husband,—

"Shall I take you for a drive this afternoon?"

He hesitated, and—to her fancy—looked embarrassed.

"I have an appointment with Jenkins"—Jenkins was the steward—"at three o'clock on a distant part of the estate—beyond Grawley Wood, and I am afraid to take you there, because there have been one or two cases of diphtheria reported."

"I am not nervous," Lilith said, with a slight frown—for her ladyship had a distinct objection to not having her own way, and she had rather set her heart on the drive that afternoon.

"Perhaps not, but I am nervous on your behalf. I should not feel myself justified in running any risk where you are concerned."

"You mean, then, that you refuse to go with me?"

"That is a very ungracious way of putting it," observed Colin, with a smile; "nothing would give me greater pleasure than to go with you, but I cannot take you to Eadacott, because, as I said before, I object to your breathing air that may possibly be infected."

"You are going to breathe it!"

"That is a very different thing! I am a strong man, and you are a delicate woman."

Lilith pouted, and looked unconvinced.

"Give up your appointment," she suggested—and the mere fact of her making such a proposal was sufficient indication of the change that had taken place in the relations between husband and wife.

"I would do so readily if it were possible, Lyndhurst returned, earnestly, "but unfortunately it is not. You see the diphtheria has appeared in cottages belonging to me, and complaints have been made regarding the condition of the drains. If they really are defective, I must lose no time in having them seen to, and Jenkins is going to bring a surveyor with him this afternoon to make an examination. So you observe it is impossible for me to stay away. Believe me, I am far more disappointed than you can be."

Lilith was quite sensible enough to acknowledge the force of his reasoning, and to respect his firmness, but that is not to say that she was the less annoyed at it!

She turned away with some petulance, and went to her boudoir, when she rang the bell, and countermanded her order for the ponies.

From behind the shrouding lace of the curtains, she saw her husband ride his chest-



[IN A FEW MOMENTS LADY LILITH HAD SATISFIED HERSELF THAT IT WAS HER HUSBAND.]

nut mare down the avenue, and she was bound to confess that on horseback he appeared to very great advantage, for he rode like a Centaur, and had been constantly in the saddle from earliest boyhood.

When he was out of sight Lilith took up a book and tried to read, but the sunbeams played so provokingly over the pages, and brought with them such visions of the fresh autumnal air, and the tinted glories of the foliage outside, that an irresistible longing came upon her to go for a long country walk; and she forthwith proceeded to her dressing-room, and put on her hat and jacket—the latter a smart little tailor-made garment that fitted her, and showed off her superb figure to perfection.

Yes, it was certainly far pleasanter in the park than in her pretty little boudoir, with its screens, and pictures, and palms and flowers. A trifle chilly, it is true, but the air as exhilarating as champagne, and the sunshine brilliant as July.

Without thinking much of where she was going, Lilith made her way to Crawley Wood, which lay some distance beyond Woodlowes—James Redmayne's farm. It was rather a large plantation of trees, with a thick undergrowth—a splendid place for rabbits, but carefully avoided by the country people on account of the reputation it enjoyed of being haunted. Some years ago a murder had been perpetrated in it, and popular rumour had it that the ghost of the victim still wandered beneath the shade of the trees, wringing its hands, and bemoaning its fate.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—Lilith knew nothing of these rumours, but if she had it is doubtful whether they would have affected her, for she was not superstitious, and ghost stories had never had any particular charm for her imagination.

Sauntering slowly along the moss-grown paths, and stopping now and then to gather a luscious blackberry from the low-growing

brambles, she was suddenly brought to a pause by the sight of two people standing some distance away from her—a man and a woman.

These was nothing unusual in the mere fact of seeing a pair of lovers keeping an assignation, and Lilith would have passed on without noticing, if she had not recognised the woman, who was no other than Letty Redmayne.

The man by her side, whose arm was round her waist, was tall and well made, but he was standing in such a position that Lilith could see very little of him—only enough to assure herself that he was not Stephen Brooks.

Having made this discovery she passed on hastily, without being seen by either of the lovers, but she was rather inclined to feel grieved at what she had witnessed, for she had taken an interest in pretty Letty and her stalwart fiancé and pleased herself by weaving a little romance over her future.

Even in the short time she had seen Stephen Brooks at the farm she had been quick to observe how fond and proud he was of his little sweetheart; and lo! he had not been gone many weeks before Letty forgot her vows of faith, and encouraged the wooing of another lover!

Who could that other one be? He looked like a gentleman—nay, Lilith felt convinced that he was a gentleman, and if so, the acquaintance boded no good to the farmer's pretty daughter.

Lilith felt half inclined to turn back and go straight to the Woodlowes, and warn old Redmayne, but then second thoughts came, telling her how little good such warnings generally brought, and she finally decided that she would consult her husband on the matter and be guided by his decision.

The episode had so far disturbed her as to take away all pleasure from her walk, so she soon turned back, but instead of going through the wood walked down a path outside that skirted it. Her purpose in doing this was to

avoid all chance of meeting Letty Redmayne and her lover, but, curiously enough, she had not gone far before she saw Letty herself on in front, accompanied by the tall, broad-shouldered man who had been with her in the wood.

Was it the same, though? Lady Lilith's heart began to beat rather violently, for as she drew nearer the man's figure became more clearly defined—more familiar, and in a few moments she had satisfied herself beyond all doubt that it was her husband!

She stood still, too surprised and shocked to look on, and at that moment Letty happened to look round and saw her.

Evidently the sight was not a welcome one to the farmer's daughter, for after an instant's hesitation, she said something in a low, rapid tone to Lyndhurst, and then walked quickly away in the direction of home.

Lyndhurst turned round, and retraced his steps to meet his wife.

(To be continued.)

CHRISTMAS CHARITY.—Of all times in the year the Christmas-tide is that at which hearts and purse-strings should open widest in thoughts and deeds of charity. Those who give who never gave before, and those who are charitable always should at this season give the more. Some of our overflow of happiness should not fail to reach the poor and miserable, whom Father Christmas, an aristocratic fellow, is otherwise apt to slight. "To give is more blessed than to receive," especially when with so little so much happiness may be brought about. The most of those best able to give, who are apt to be personally unacquainted with the misery of our great city and the proper ways for its relief, will do well to distribute their bounty through the regularly organised channels, which reach all classes.



[THE OLD MAN DREW GUY TO HIM WITH A DESPAIRING CLUTCH, AS THOUGH HE WOULD NEVER LET HIM GO.]

NOVELETTE.]

RHONA'S REVENGE.

—10:—

CHAPTER I.

"A KIND OF OLD HOBGOBLIN HALL."

The declining rays of the December sun shone redly on the many-paned windows of King's Leigh. On its hoary gables, clustered chimney stacks, and moss- chequered roof, casting sanguinary lights on the spotless snow, that hung in festoons and fairy-like wreaths on eave and porch and balustrade, tinting the drooping icicles with a hundred colours till they looked like bits chipped off a rainbow; glancing on the ice-bound pond, with a last lingering touch, a silent farewell caress; illuminating the tops of the great, gaunt, bare trees with a golden glory, a regal splendour, for a brief while; and then sinking silently to rest in a mantle of purple and amber, leaving the "black bat, night," to creep up and cast its weird shadows on valley and hill, park, and wood, and invest the old house with so ghost-like an appearance that it looked as though no human being could live there, and was solely and only the abode of unblest spirits who, restless and unquiet from the burden of many crimes committed while on earth, found no rest in the grave, and urged by the memory of the gloomy past, revisited the scene of their sins, and nightly repeated some ghastly tragedy.

Yet King's Leigh, despite its drear aspect in its winter garb, was neither haunted by a troop of blood-stained spectral visitants, nor deserted by human beings. Far from it, Lancelot Leigh, better known to all dwellers in the county of Dashshire as Squire Lancelot, lived there, and with him his sister Jocasta and his son Guy, and his grand-niece Rhona Deverell, whom he took to live in his house out of charity, when her father and sole survi-

ving parent, a poor struggling artist, had died. Many wondered at this piece of generosity on the part of the Equire, as it was well known that the high-bred, haughty country gentleman had never forgiven his eldest sister Anna, some twenty years his senior, for having married beneath her a clerk in an attorney's office at Thersgell, a handsome, dashing fellow, but possessed of neither birth nor money, thus bringing disgrace on the blue-blooded, long-pedigreed family.

Anna preferred "love in a cottage" with the man of her choice to birth, position, or riches, and she took the snubs of her haughty kinsfolk very coolly, and was perfectly happy with her husband, who, to do him justice—though he was a little bit of a snob, and lacked the true polish breeding alone gives—was devoted to her, and divided his affection equally between his wife and only child, a boy who favoured the Leighs, and showed none of the paternal plebeian blood, but was aristocratic and elegant, from the crown of his golden head to the sole of his slender foot.

The Deverells managed to leave their son a moderate income, but he had a taste for painting, and spent the greater part of it wandering in sunny southern cities, studying the old masters at Rome, and the old buildings at Venice, and idling in the orange groves of Tangiers, finally falling in love with a Contadina who stood for him, and looked away his heart with her great brown, liquid eyes, and whom he made his wife and brought to England.

But the cold grey skies, the chill winds of her husband's country, did not suit the sun-loving Contadina. She sickened, and drooped, and died when Rhona was born, leaving Paul Deverell heart-broken, bankrupt in health, wealth, and happiness.

For a while he struggled on for the sake of his child; but two years later he followed the wife he had loved so dearly, and Rhona was left to the world's mercy.

Then it was that Squire Lancelot came forward and took the little orphan to his heart and home, or, more correctly speaking, to his home only. He was far too haughty a man to forgive the accident of her birth. She was a thorn in his side, a blot on his escutcheon, an everlasting reminder of his sister's mistake; and Jocasta, a woman proud and cold as himself, wondered silently what had made her brother stretch out a helping hand to his low-born grand-niece.

That good and austere lady knew nothing of a sad, heart-broken letter sent to the Squire by Paul Deverell, a few days before his death, begging help for his friendless babe, and enclosing a miniature of himself, limned by his own hand, which bore such a striking resemblance to the dead Anna, who, during the Squire's youth, before her marriage, had been more than a mother to him, and whom he had dearly loved till her ill-advised union parted them, that his feelings softened; and, for the sake of the dead woman, who had once been so much to him, and the past, he promised to take the child and see that she wanted for nothing.

And in a way he kept his word. In a way, I say, because people generally require something beyond a house to live in, clothes to wear, and something to eat and drink three or four times a day, and Rhona was not an exception to the general rule.

Though the living image of her father and grandmother, having the same golden-hued hair and limpid, grey eyes, tall, slight figure, and aristocratic bearing of the Leighs, still in temperament she was more like her Italian mother, the Contadina. Was loving, impulsive, warm-hearted, and naturally gay. But the chill, moral atmosphere of King's Leigh checked all that, crushed it back, caused her to appear, externally, shy, quiet, undemonstrative.

The sixteen years of her life, spent in her grand-uncle's fine old house, had not been un-

alloyed bliss; and but for the presence of one being would have been wretched indeed. The being who made the sunshine of her existence was Guy Leigh, the Squire's only son and heir.

Squire Lancelot had been long looking about for a woman, suitably handsome and high-bred, to be mistress of his house and fortune, and at last chose Ada Rendell, the daughter of a neighbouring baronet—a sweet, fair, yielding girl, who obeyed her father without a murmur—when the order went forth that she was to marry the haughty, cold, middle-aged master of King's Leigh.

Without a murmur she married the man chosen for her. When Sir Jasper told her that her refusal to do so would be ruin to him and her brother she gave herself up as a sacrifice. But her heart-strings broke at the altar, when she felt the touch of Lancelot's ice-cold fingers, as he slipped on the golden circlet that bound her to him, and knew she dared not think again of the bonnie sailor lad who had gone a-sailing to far countries some two years before in search of fame and fortune, which he intended to bring back and lay, with his honest, true heart, at her feet.

She did her duty. She thrust all thought of her lover aside, and was an obedient, dutiful wife; but she languished for a warmer, more affectionate atmosphere, and, after five years of married life, died quietly without any fuss or bother, almost before anyone knew she was ill, and left the Squire free to marry again—a freedom, however, of which he did not avail himself.

She had borne him a son; he had an heir to endow with his old name and his old house; and what more did he want? Why, nothing, certainly, in the shape of a wife.

His youngest sister Jocasta was more to his liking than any other woman could possibly be. She was hard, cold and haughty as himself, and managed his house admirably; so he gave no thought to a second mistress for his princely establishment, but gave himself up to the enjoyment of watching and training his only child. A congenial occupation, for the cold heart centred all its affection on the little boy, who was strangely like both mother and father in appearance, but who, fortunately for himself, had inherited the gentle, maternal disposition, and sweet temper which nothing could spoil or alter. Fortunately—for the Squire, in his mad idolization, denied him nothing—brought him up in a way which would have utterly spoiled most children.

Not so, however, Guy Leigh. He was one in a thousand—a bright, noble, unselfish lad. Clever, and gentlemanly, with a singularly high-bred manner and bearing, and a kind word for high and low, and a winsome way which gained him the love and affection of nearly all who came in contact with him.

Not only was he adored by his father. Miss Jocasta's grim features unbent into the semblance of a smile at his approach. He could get her to do almost anything he pleased; the servants worshipped him; Tiggs, the gardener, was ever ready to snip off his choicest blooms for the "young master," strip his conservatory or greenhouse bare. Rolt, the head gamekeeper, would stay up night after night with the young pheasants so that he should not be disappointed on the First; while Jem, the groom, would always have his favourite mount in good condition, and took more care over Black Rupert than he did over any other horse in the stable.

But the one who loved the young heir best was Rhona, the Contadina's penniless child. She loved him with all the warmth and intensity of her passionate Southern nature—all the more intense from years of unnatural repression. He was the outlet for the "garnered up" treasure of her affection, and she lavished it on him with no niggard hand. Why should she not? She had no one else to give it to. She was a mere cipher in that huge household—a unit—and a unit of whom everyone made use, and no one troubled to be civil to, or tarried to gauge the depth of the

dangerous Southern temper save one, and that one was the man she idolised, worshipped with such force and passion as we temperate cold-blooded English have little or no idea of, and are, fortunately, utterly incapable of feeling.

And it was little to be wondered at. He was the only one who had a gentle word for her, a kind glance, an atom of consideration. He did not put much store on birth and breeding, and saw no reason for snubbing or neglecting a girl who could not help the accident of her birth. Besides, they had grown up together, since he was a little fellow of eight, and imperiously demanded the fair-haired baby to be handed over to him as a plaything, a request which his doting father complied with, as he complied with every other.

Could the haughty old man have lifted the veil which obscures the future, and have seen what would happen in years to come, it is probable that he would have relegated the helpless orphan to the tender clutches of the workhouse folk, and denied his son the playmate he doted on. But as he could not look into the future, and was unable to bear hearing the handsome boy cry for anything, he let him have the two-year old baby as a constant companion and plaything, much in the same way as he would have let him have a monkey, or a dog, or a kitten, or anything that he might have a fancy for; and was blind, as, alas! so many of us are, to the regals of the unlimited gratification of his son's wishes, and the evil that might come of it, not only for him alone, but for many others.

The firelight streamed through the oriel window of the library, casting a vivid red hue over the snow for a certain distance, and steeping the surroundings beyond into deeper gloom.

Standing by the fireplace, resting his elbow on the mantelpiece, and his cheek in the hollow of his hand, stood Guy Leigh; and facing him in an easy-chair sat Squire Lancelot. The glowing embers lit up both faces, showing the soft, fair beauty of the one, and the haughty, stern handsomeness of the other. The high forehead, the aquiline nose, the thin, firm lips, the cold, steel-blue eyes, so like, and yet so unlike the deeper blue orbs of the son.

"Yes, that is what I wish," he was saying, in his clear, high-bred, yet unpleasant voice—unpleasant, because monotonous; and from the slow way in which he spoke apparently affected, "that you should want for nothing, that you may have ample means to gratify every fancy, every whim, every taste."

"It is very kind of you!" responded the young man; "but I don't see why you should suffer here on my account!"

"It is my wish," imperiously announced his father.

"It is very good of you!" he repeated; "still really not necessary. The allowance you have hitherto given me has proved sufficient, more than sufficient, for all my wants."

"That may be hitherto, but in India your expenses will be heavier, and I would not have you want for anything whilst away from England," and the Squire's voice trembled, and for an instant a mist seemed to dim the keen eyes as they gazed at what they held most dear in all the world; for Guy, his idol, was to start on the morrow to join his regiment, which had been ordered out on active service.

Little had Squire Lancelot recked of this when he chose the army as a profession for his only child, and got him gazetted to a crack corps. England was quiet, no war apprehended, the Dampshire quartered in a garrison town not thirty miles from his home, all smooth sailing, and it was the right thing for the heirs of King's Leigh to be brave and gallant, manly and fearless, to win honour and renown.

There were only two professions for the descendant of the huge-ruffed, peaked-bearded heroes, who had fought for Queen Bess at the time of the Spanish invasion; the cavaliers who gallantly defended their king against

Cromwell's Ironsides; the splendid soldiers who served under Marlborough, and the tough, fearless sailors who fell with Nelson—the army or the navy, and he had chosen the army, thinking it the safest; and now this trouble in the East had arisen, and the brilliant, dashing career might end. How he shuddered as the thought crossed him; and in fancy he saw his child lying on the battle-field, cold, pale, stiff in death, from a thrust from a khoutar dagger, or a bullet from a long-carrying Afghan matchlock.

"I do not think they will be heavier," rejoined Guy. "I don't see how they can be. A man is sure to spend more in time of peace than when on active service. We won't have many chances of spending money or being extravagant when we are waiting to have a breeze with some of the hill tribes, or marching towards the scene of action. So really, sir, I would rather, far rather, that the old Christmas festivities had been kept up, and the old house filled with guests and gay voices!"

"What will the Christmas festivities be to me without you here to join in them?" interrupted the Squire, testily; "and what do you think I care for gay voices in the house? There is only one voice I care to hear, and that one will be absent."

"Still, friendly faces would make the place less drear to you, make you feel my absence less, keep you from thinking of my departure so much."

"Do you think that? Do you really think that any number of friends would make up to me for your absence, keep me from thinking of you?"

The old man sat forward as he spoke, and gazed at the young one. For a full moment they looked into each other's eyes, and then Guy, as he clasped his father's hand, and pressed it warmly, said—

"No! I think nothing could do that, and I regret inexpressibly that I must set out on the eve of Christmas; at any other time it would seem less hard. Still duty calls, and I must obey. I could not be the first to disgrace our motto, 'Free and Fearless.'"

"No, no!" agreed the Squire; yet a spasm contracted his face as he spoke. "You must go and win renown, in the arena of the world; but Heaven grant you return safely to us."

"There is little fear that I shall not," responded the other, with all the buoyancy of youth. "The time will pass quickly; this trouble will soon be settled, and I shall be back almost before you have missed me."

"I trust so."

"Don't take such a gloomy view of matters, father. Trust in fate; all will be well."

"I hope so," repeated Squire Lancelot, "and if after matters are settled your regiment is not ordered home, you must leave the army and return here to take up your proper position. The heir of King's Leigh must not live an alien life."

"Quite so, sir. I agree with you," rejoined Guy, with an alacrity that astonished the elder man.

"You cannot be always on the tramp, sent from place to place by the higher authorities, like any penniless sub. You must return; I have other views for you."

"Yes?"

"Yes, other views. On your return we must begin to think of your marriage."

At these words young Leigh shifted his position slightly, and partly covered his face with his hand, so that the ruddy embers could not fall on it and disclose its expression to the keen eyes opposite.

"We must look about for a suitable bride for you—one with beauty, wealth, birth, position!"

"A lady with so many attractions will be hard to find, sir, I think; and, perhaps, if found, not willing to marry me!" he remarked, in a slightly sarcastic tone.

"Not so hard as you think. I know one charming girl with all the necessary qualifications."

"Indeed!" Guy's tone indicated considerable alarm.

"Yes; and I am inclined to think she would not say nay if you asked her to be mistress of the Leigh."

"You must know her very well to be so sure?"

"I do; and I hope one day to see you mated to her."

"Wishes are not always gratified, sir," he said, with some little irritation, "and at present I am in no humour to think of wooing and wedding this lady you speak of."

"Not now—not now, my boy; but later on—later on."

"Neither now nor later on," thought Guy to himself, adding aloud as the sound of the gong rang through the house, "The ladies will be waiting. We shall only just be in time to conduct aunt and my cousin to the dining-room."

"Cousin—pooh! nonsense! Why will you persist in calling Rhona your cousin? I tell you she is nothing to you—nothing whatever!"

"I differ with you there," returned the Lieutenant, warmly.

"She is nothing," continued the Squire, taking no notice of the other's remark, "to you. A low-born wench that I will not have classed as a relative; a creature that would have died in the workhouse long ago save for my charity!"

For a moment Guy's hands clenched, and the sea-blue eyes flashed like flints; but, mastering himself by an effort, he held the door open as his father passed out, and followed him in silence to the drawing-room, where Jocasta Leigh, grim and repellent as usual, stood side by side under the chandelier with a girl, who looked brilliantly beautiful in the full blaze of the light that shone on her white neck, dazzlingly white against the black dress she wore out low on the bosom, and bright hair, which seemed to flash and glint as she moved.

A poet's dream, a painter's ideal, a lovely living creature, delicate and refined, and Squire Lanselot called her "a low-born wench!"

CHAPTER II.

"STILL FOR EVER, FARE THEE WELL."

THE next morning was one of the bitterest of all December's bleak and bitter days. The wind moaned and sighed with an eerie sound, like the wail of a Banshee through the leafless trees. The air was keen and piercing; the crisp snow was a foot deep, and flew in powdery clouds at each blast of air, and drifted into great heaps at the road-side.

Guy Leigh pulled his military coat closer over his breast as he stepped out into the icy atmosphere, and, with a quick glance about, hurried off to the wood which lay a quarter of a mile to the rear of the house, and where all the gloominess of winter seemed concentrated.

Colourless, cheerless gloom, save in one spot where a crimson dress made a vivid contrast to the darkness around, and was a beacon for Guy—a beacon which drew him steadily and swiftly along.

"My own!" he murmured, as he reached the giant oak under which Rhona stood, and clasped her in his arms. "So you have kept the tryst?"

"Dearest, did you think I would not?" she answered, lifting her head from his shoulder, where for an instant it had rested.

"I thought you would if you could. But—"

"Would if I could!" she repeated, in accents of reproach. "Do you think anything could have kept me from coming to bid you farewell, love—here, alone—where we can give utterance to the pent-up feelings of our hearts?"

"It is such an awful morning for you to come out," he explained.

"I thought nothing of that. I hardly

noticed the cold. My thoughts were, and are, concentrated on you!" she responded, her eyes fixed with devouring eagerness on the blonde face so dear—so inexpressibly dear—to her!

"And aunt? You managed to escape her keen eyes?"

"Miss Jocasta is not up yet. It is only eight o'clock. She never rises till past that hour."

"Ah!" He made a little gesture of impatience as she spoke. It vexed him to hear the woman he loved speak of his aunt as Miss Jocasta, just as a servant might.

"And the Squire is safe also for that time?" he continued.

"Yes," she assented. "And that time," she went on, with a burst of irrepressible emotion, "is one half-hour. Thirty minutes, and then—then we part, never, perhaps, to meet again! Oh, Guy! Guy! I cannot let you go! Stay with me! stay with me! You are the light of my life! the sun of my existence! How shall I live without you?"

"My dearest!" he whispered soothingly, pressing the fair cheek against his breast with a tender hand, "do not grieve. I shall return before long. You must think of the happy days in store for us. We are young—we have life before us. You must not despond."

"You may never return!" she said, solemnly, lifting the limpid gray eyes, tear-laden and heavy, to his face; and something of the fear and terror in that glance found its way to his heart, and he shuddered as though stricken with ague. But, recovering himself almost at once, he said gaily,—

"What, is this my courageous Rhona, my daughter of the South, who was to inspire me with such ardour, that I was to set off bent upon slaying the dingy natives by the score, to think nothing of danger, only to dream of fame and glory, and the number of scalps I could hang to my war-belt?"

"That—that was before there was any question of your regiment being ordered—on active service," she faltered. "Now—I tremble when I think of the dangers you must face—the horrors you may have to suffer! And, oh, Guy! with a cry of exceeding anguish, "it will kill me if anything happens to you! I cannot live without you!"

"Rhona!" he ejaculated, with tender reproach, "you will unman me! I came here hoping to be encouraged and strengthened by your sweet, womanly counsel, your last words, and now—now you distress me terribly!"

"Forgive me, love!" she murmured, penitently, "you are so much to me! I think my poor heart will break! I will try and encourage you—try and be brave—for your dear sake. It is cowardly to add to your pain, to make your sorrow heavier. See, I am better now—I can smile!" and, dashing the tears from her eyes, she forced her quivering lips into the semblance of a smile, which was so sad, that he caught her closer to him, and covered her face with kisses.

"Are all your arrangements made?" he inquired after a while, as they paced quickly up and down under the snow-laden trees.

"Yes," she whispered, drooping her eyes, while a rosy blush stole over the fair face, and crimsoned it from brow to chin.

"You think it will be safe to go to Mrs. Luxmoor's?"

"I think so; it is a hundred miles away. I could not go much farther then."

"No, poor child! Would to Heaven you had not to leave the Leigh at all!"

"I do not mind going; it is for your sake."

"My own darling!" and he crumpled up the little trembling hands in his, and pressed them to his lips. "If I could only think of some other plan," he went on, "something that would be better for you."

"Nothing could be better," she responded, quickly, determined to make up for her former cowardice and low spirits. "She has our confidence, she has been kind to me, and you, her godson, she absolutely adores! For your sake she is sure to be good to me."

"I hope so," he rejoined, rather gloomily. "And so you think you will be able to get away?"

"I think so. Your father is not so fond of me as to wish to keep me always at his side." There was a tinge of bitterness in her voice as she spoke of her grand-uncle which did not escape her companion.

"You must make allowances for him," he expostulated. "All his creeds and faiths were blown to the four winds when my Aunt Anna married as she did. In these days of equality such narrow-mindedness is scoffed and laughed at. But he was bred up to believe that high birth was the best thing a man could possess, and that a Leigh of King's Leigh was only second to the highest in the land."

"Yes, I know," she agreed. "I make allowances. Still I would rather go to Farrer's Hold and stay with Mrs. Luxmoor than remain at the Leigh. There I shall be able to hear from you often; and be free to write to you whenever I like; here I shall never receive a line from you—never hear news of you unless the Squire or Miss Jocasta choose to read out portions of your letters, or tell me anything; and that—that will be the hardest thing of all to bear."

"It will, my darling! I know. Still, we must observe this precaution. My father must not learn our secret while I am absent. That would be fatal to us."

"Yes, I know. The pleasure of writing must be denied us. Later on we will make up for it."

"We will, indeed, and for other things. My father will learn to love you at last, and then—"

"You are wrong," she interrupted. "Your father will never love me, never look upon me as anything save a low-born creature, almost entirely beneath his notice."

"I am not of that opinion. If you try to please him in the end you may succeed."

"I think not; yet for your sake I will try."

"That is my brave little girl," and he stooped his head over hers, but as he bent the sound of a gong rang out on the air, and they started apart like guilty things.

"Nine already!" he ejaculated.

"Is it possible?" she asked, as he looked at his watch.

"Yes. How swiftly the time has passed! One kiss, love, and we must part!"

With despairing energy she clung to him, and hid her face on his bosom that he might not see the tears gathering thickly in her eyes. This was their farewell, and a few hours later the servants would be throwing the hall to say good-bye to the young master. Miss Jocasta would be looking on, and the Squire's cold eyes taking in everything. Then she would only dare to touch his hand, now her arms were round him, his heart beating on hers, their lips seeking each other's. This was joy, this parting in the woods alone; that would be pain, intolerable pain, the adieu under scrutinizing eyes.

Everything must come to an end. They could not tarry; so with one convulsive clasp, one last kiss, in which he seemed to "draw her whole soul through her lips," he tore himself from the clinging arms, and not trusting himself to look back, passed through the woods to the house.

A few minutes later they met again at the breakfast-table. Stern necessity had obliged her to dry her eyes, sponge the trace of tears from her face, and appear in her usual place calm and collected.

Fortunately, she was not much noticed. Once Guy looked at her, but the sight of her pale, sorrowful face almost unmanned him, and he dared not look again, lest he should lose his hard-won composure. The others did not look at her. They had something else to think of, and soon rose from the scarcely-tasted breakfast. Everything was in a state of confusion. Servants were hurrying hither and thither. Miss Jocasta

was issuing orders which the Squire contradicted the next moment. The rooms were littered with rugs, papers, boxes, tin cases, a thousand and one things, most of which the young lieutenant had made up his mind to leave behind as useless impediments, and which his father had decided he should take.

At last the moment arrived when the dog-cart appeared, and all knew it was time for the heir to depart. He came into the hall where the domestics were drawn up in a line to wish him farewell, with the Squire leaning on his arm. The haughty old face was very white, and the thin lips firmly compressed, but Jocasta and Guy knew that the tears were not far from the keen eyes, and that he was suffering untold grief at parting with his idolized child. Farther back in the shade stood Rhona, her little hands locked together, her bloodless lips quivering. For an instant her lover's eyes rested on her, but, turning quickly away, he spoke a cheery word of adieu to each of the servants, kissed his aunt, pressed the hands of the woman he loved, whispering, "Heaven bless you, my darling!" and then took his father in his arms, the old man drawing him to his breast with a despairing clutch, as though he would keep him with him and never let him go, his eyes she while fondly resting on the features that were so dear to him.

It was a painful scene, and with an effort Guy drew himself from his father's embrace, sprang into the dog-cart, and in another instant was speeding down the avenue, and in a few more was out of sight.

With a groan the Squire saw the last of the son he loved—his Benjamin. Covering his face with his hands he tottered to the library, and, locking himself in, refused to admit anyone for the rest of the day. Twice Rhona crept timidly to the door and begged him to take some nourishment, but he ordered her sternly away, and she was glad to go to her cold, cheerless little room and weep out her heart's grief alone and uninterrupted.

Grief, however, is a luxury in which the rich only can indulge to their heart's content. The poor must thrust aside their sorrow, no matter how bitter, and go on with their labours, their toiling and moiling, and it was thus with the Squire's grand-niece.

She was poor, she was dependent—she had to work for her daily bread.

Her position at the Leigh was no sinecure, not an enviable one; she was at Miss Jocasta's beck and call from morning till night. That good lady kept an antique servant as maid, over sixty years of age, old, ugly, useless, past her work, but not likely to be dismissed, as she knew one or two queer family secrets, so her failing fingers were supplemented by Rhona's nimble ones.

She it was who turned the stiff brocades and rich silks worn by the Squire's sister, making old dresses look like new ones, and manufactured the dainty bits of ribbon and lace which surmounted Miss Jocasta's abundant iron-grey tresses. She it was who matched her silks for embroidery altar-cloths for the neighbouring church, and wools for slippers for the neighbouring vicar—a portly, fox-hunting, wine-loving clergyman—on whom Miss Leigh had turned her cold eyes as a possible spouse, thinking she would be better off as permanent and absolute mistress of the vicarage than temporary and partial mistress of the Leigh; for she astutely reasoned that, though she might keep her place during her brother's lifetime, she could not hope to do so after his death, when her nephew brought his bride home.

The vicar, however, had not proposed. Snavely he accepted the altar-cloths and praised her work, with equal snavely he accepted the slippers and wore them, and doubtless found them warm and comfortable; also presents of game and fruit, also invitations to dinner, but nothing more. This disciple of the Lord was a wary one, and knew how to avoid the trap set for him, and invitingly baited. Although invariably cour-

teous and attentive, he spoke no word which the lady could construe into a proposal; but still she hoped and dressed for him, worked for him, and worried Rhona until the poor girl was nearly out of her mind.

Miss Jocasta soon recovered her spirits after the departure of her nephew, and was quite herself by Christmas-day, which to her was a sort of gala day, as she saw the vicar in the morning at church, and heard him preach, and had the felicity of having him at her left side during dinner, while they discussed turkey, plum-pudding, mince pies, and other seasonable dainties, but to Rhona and the Squire the day was inexpressibly dreary. He missed the cheery tones he loved to listen to, and remained the greater part of the day in his study alone, nursing his grief, but this luxury was denied Rhona. She had to accompany Miss Jocasta to church, listen to her prosings about the sermon and the vicar afterwards; take Sambo, her fat pug, for a walk, and do dozens of little things which her amiable grand-aunt directed her to do.

She was very thankful when night came, and she was free to go to her room, and in quiet and silence reflect on her sad fate, and think of the man she loved, whom she might never meet again.

Slowly the days passed, each one like another. She almost lost the count of time. The weather was very severe, and she seldom went out, except when sent for wools or silks; and she hailed almost joyfully the announcements that Clementine Rendell, niece to the Squire's late wife, was coming to stay at the Leigh.

It is probable she would not have been joyful had she known that this was the girl Squire Lancelot had chosen for his son's bride; but she did not know, so was glad—glad of anything which would break the dreary monotony of her existence.

The Squire gave orders that a suite of rooms in the west wing—bright sunny rooms, very different from the dingy garret apportioned to Rhona—should be prepared for Miss Rendell, and personally superintended the arrangement of them. It was something to think of, and it made him forget for a few moments the dread horror that lurked at his heart, the fear that he should never more meet the blonde-faced son he idolized. Everything was ready; and one night, about five o'clock, a carriage dashed up the avenue through the drifting snow and Rhona, as she followed Miss Jocasta into the hall, saw the Squire warmly welcoming a very elegantly attired woman of about six-and-twenty, a dashing, plump brunette, with thin lips of a vermilion hue, hard, brilliant black eyes and hair to match, glossy, luxuriant, and twisted and tortured into the latest fashion—a striking face, almost handsome, yet hardly pleasant. The eyes were a little too bold, the lips too thin, the jaw too square and massive, the expression at times merciless. Her carriage and figure were good, her manners a trifle condescending.

"Who is this?" she inquired, after greeting Miss Jocasta, indicating Rhona by a wave of the hand. She had been educated abroad, and on her return to England had been too much occupied with gaiety to pay a visit to the Leigh, and knew her uncle-in-law and his sister only through meeting them occasionally in town, on which occasions Rhona had not been with them, so she was ignorant of her existence. Now, having failed to win a coroneted spouse, and having met her cousin Guy that autumn at a mutual friend's house, where he was staying to enjoy the pleasures of grouse-shooting, and having rather more than admired his handsome face, she had accepted the Squire's invitation with thinly-veiled eagerness, hoping that it might pave the way to her ultimately becoming mistress of King's Leigh.

"Rhona Deverell," he hastened to explain, "a distant connection."

"Ah, I see," rejoined Miss Rendell, with an insolent laugh that brought the blood to Rhona's cheek, "a poor relation, kept out of

charity! I had no idea you were so kind-hearted, uncle? It does you credit, this sort of thing."

The Squire muttered something which was not quite intelligible, and threw open the library-door, disclosing a dainty tea equipage, coolly set out before a glowing fire. His guest uttered an exclamation of delight and passed in, followed by Miss Jocasta and Rhona, who, as usual, proceeded to dispense tea, thus creating a diversion which was what he wished, for though he was anything but partial to the Contadina's child, still he was a gentleman, and did not wish her to be gratuitously insulted under his roof.

"This is delightful!" sighed Clementine, throwing off her rich sables, and sinking into an easy-chair by the fire, as she took the cup Miss Jocasta proffered, "after that long, cold journey."

"Yes; it is not pleasant weather for travelling."

"Anything but, and it made it worse travelling alone."

"Travelling alone!" ejaculated her hostess. "Surely you did not come all the way from Scotland alone?"

"I did," asserted Miss Rendell, stretching out a French-booted foot towards the glowing coals.

"But—but—why?"

"Because my friends, the Tremaines, with whom I have been staying for the last four months, were setting off for the Riviera, and just as I was ready to leave Glenmouchie, my maid Félise fell down in a dead faint, from which nothing seemed to rouse her. I could not possibly stay there, so I was obliged to leave her in the charge of the old housekeeper, left to look after the place, and came on by myself."

"Dear me, how unfortunate!"

"Yes, isn't it? I don't know what I shall do. Can you let your maid attend on me for a little while till I can get someone?"

"Yes, certainly," acquiesced Miss Jocasta. "But I don't know how she will please you. She is old, and not very deft."

"Indeed! Who is it, then, makes those charming little caps you wear, and those pretty lace fichus?"

"Oh! Rhona makes those."

"Ah! Rhona," said Miss Rendell, turning her hard eyes on the soft face she had already learnt to hate, because it was far fairer than her own; "perhaps she won't mind helping me a little for the present, until I am suited."

Rhona threw up her head at this, and looked at the heiress with dilated nostrils and flashing eyes, but the Squire not noticing it, said very quietly,—

"Yes, Rhona can make herself useful to you. I wish your stay here to be agreeable," which he did.

Miss Rendell was an heiress, fifty thousand pounds her dower. She was well-bred, good-looking, the daughter of a baronet. She was just the woman he wished his son to wed. So poor Rhona was constituted lady's maid to her lover's cousin, and dared not give utterance to the anger and wrath that filled her heart at the insult.

CHAPTER III.

"AH! LIFE! TO ME BUT A LIVING DEATH!"

BITTER indeed were the days that followed to Rhona Deverell. She was ordered hither and thither by the haughty, selfish woman, to whom Squire Lancelot had in a way given her.

Since Guy's departure she fancied she had been treated more coldly, with much less consideration, and after being condemned to act as servant to the heiress, she was certain of it. She was meant to feel her sad position, meant to understand that she was utterly beneath them all, hardly fit to sit at the same table with them. To add to her bitterness, she soon found out that Miss Rendell loved Guy—her Guy—and that the Squire desired a

marriage between them more than he desired anything else on earth.

Her heart seemed to die within her when she discovered this. It was so hard, so terribly hard, to listen to the careless words of the other, who made no secret of her tenderness for the young heir.

"May I have this, aunt?" she asked one day, taking up a photograph of Guy. She always called Miss Jocaasta "aunt," though that lady was really no relative.

"What is it, my dear?"

"A photo of Guy," replied Clementine, with a sigh. "Dear Guy! how much I wish he was here!"

"So do I," agreed the elder lady; "the house seems cheerless without him, and then Lancelot is so dull, he is quite depressing, and makes me feel nervous."

"No wonder he is anxious. Well, can I have this portrait?"

"Of course. Certainly you can," replied Miss Jocaasta, briskly. She took her cue from the Squire, and knew Miss Rendell was to be humoured.

"Thanks, it is kind of you! Now I shall be able to study his features at my leisure. Do you know we are capital friends, more than cousins!" This was pleasant intelligence for the pale girl, who sat so still and quiet, embroidering an altar cloth, and trying to check the stormy throbbing of her heart. "We were never apart at Glenmouchie! How I wish we had met before," and she sighed again sentimentally.

"It would have been better," replied the other, significantly; "all things might have been arranged satisfactorily by now."

"Yes, still it is not too late. On his return, which I hope will be before long, what you and Uncle Lance kindly wish, and what I dearly wish" (here she cast down the bold eyes, and tried to blush), "may come to pass, and we be all in all to each other."

"I hope so."

And Rhona could hardly keep from springing up and crying out, "He is mine, he is mine; you cannot, you shall not take him from me," but she knew that would be fatal to his interests and here, so she bit her lip till the blood came, and kept silent. Still sometimes, when she gazed at the glowing, brilliant face of her rival, saw her splendid dresses, heard her beautiful voice singing a *bravura*, and thought of the wealth she possessed, a doubt would creep into her heart, and she would wonder if Guy had admired his cousin as warmly as she wished believed, and if he would ever forget her, Rhona, the poor ill-dressed, down-trodden dependent. Then she would think of his debonaire face, his winsome ways, his tender care for her, and she would thrust the doubt aside, and be happy for a while, until her tormentress poured more poison into her ears.

"Well, what are you doing? Raking the ashes like a second Cinderella?" demanded Miss Rendell, one February evening, as on her return from a dinner at the Vicarage she found Rhona, whom she had ordered to wait up to help her to unrobe, kneeling on the hearthrug, staring at the glowing embers deep in thought, and utterly oblivious of her presence, bodily at the Leigh, but in the spirit far, far away in distant India, with the man she loved!

"I—I was thinking," stammered the girl, rising instantly to her feet.

"Oh, indeed! Your thoughts must have been extremely interesting, for you did not seem to hear me come in."

"They were," replied Rhona, defiantly.

"Really! Perhaps they might interest me," continued the heiress, coolly surveying her victim, whom she hated cordially, because in a dim way she began to suspect her of having a tenderness for Guy. Love sharpens a woman's eyes in a marvellous fashion, and she had noticed many little things that escaped even the Squire and Miss Jocaasta's keen glances. She saw the girl's suppressed

eagerness when the letter bag was brought in of a morning, the disappointment depicted on her face when only ordinary notes were produced, and the light that lit it up when a letter from Guy arrived; how breathlessly she listened to any part that was read out, how her eyes fastened on it, and how her colour came and went! "They might interest me. You had better tell me what they were?"

"No, I will not do that. My thoughts are my own."

"The Squire may think that while you reside in his house nothing is yours, not even your thoughts."

"He could not think that."

"He may! However, we won't quarrel about them. I dare say they are not worth a rap to me, and probably are about some ploughboy or footman. Come and help me to undress."

Rhona's hands clenched at this insult, till the soft white flesh was bruised, but murmuring "for his sake," she stifled her rage and indignation, and helped to remove the costly dress and embroidered shoes, replacing them by a wrapper and warm slippers.

"Stay," commanded Miss Rendell, as she turned to go, "I am not sleepy to-night, and wish someone to talk to, so for want of a better companion must put up with you."

"Give me that fan!" she went on, as Rhona, not daring to disobey the imperious mandate, turned back. "The fire will spoil my complexion. Now sit down there!" indicating an extremely uncomfortable three-legged stool by a wave of her hand, "and answer all my questions. When did you come here?" She had her suspicions, and was determined to find out if there was any tie, any secret between Rhona and Guy. She was a merciless, vain woman, and never gave a thought to the pain she was causing, or, if she did, only enjoyed it.

"Sixteen years ago."

"How old were you then?"

"Two."

"You have lived here ever since?"

"Yes!"

"What made my uncle give you shelter?"

"Charity, I suppose!" There was covert sarcasm in her voice.

"And he has been very kind to you?"

"As kind as I could expect."

"Considering you are the daughter of a woman who was not presentable."

"Miss Rendell!" said Rhona, with forced calmness, rising to her feet, "I will listen to anything you may have to say against myself, but not to one word against my parents."

"Really, now. You have a spirit, then?"

"Yes! I have a spirit, and a dangerous one, perhaps. I am partly Italian."

"Thanks for the interesting information," sneered the other. "As you don't seem to like the subject of yourself I'll change it. Now, what do you think of my cousin, Guy Leigh?" She stared fixedly at the girl as she spoke, and saw the crimson wave mount to her very brow.

"Think—think—of Mr. Leigh?" she faltered.

"Yes! Of Mr. Leigh? You have lived in the same house with him for many years, and must know something of his disposition. I am interested in him, and wish to hear what others think of him."

"Mr. Leigh is good, generous, brave, unselfish," answered the woman he loved, mastering her agitation by a mighty effort, "beloved by all who know him!"

"Including yourself?"

This impertinent question was put with startling rapidity; but Rhona was on her guard, and simply ejaculated, "Miss Rendell!"

"Well, you said 'all,' so I suppose you included yourself. I am glad to hear such a favourable report of him, as I am so much interested."

"May I ask why?" returned the other.

"Oh, certainly," airily responded the heiress. "I came here with an object, as I suppose you are aware?"

"No!"

"No! Didn't the Squire tell you about it?"

"No. I am not in his confidences."

"Ah! Well the object is Guy. Uncle wishes me to marry him."

"Marry—marry Guy!" interrupted Rhona.

"Yes! marry Guy," mimicked Clementine, her cruel eyes drinking in the deadly pallor of the face opposite. She has dared to love him, she thought, and then continued aloud, "Our estates adjoin. We are of equal rank; in every way the match will be a suitable one, and then I know he is very partial to me, and on his return possibly he will not find it very hard to learn to love me with the passionate devotion a husband should feel for his wife. What do you think?" she concluded abruptly.

"I—I don't know!" gasped her victim, as she felt the blood chill within her, and rush back to her tortured heart as the prospect of Guy learning to love another woman.

"It does not matter much, if at all, what you think," rejoined the other scornfully, "unless he has amused himself in this dull Hobgoblin Hall of a place by flirting with you for want of a better occupation."

"Do you want me any more, or can I go?" asked the poor girl, faintly.

"You can go!" replied Miss Rendell, with a triumphant look, as she crept away to her cold, cheerless room; and throwing herself down by the bed wept in agony, and wearied Heaven with her prayers for Guy's safe return to her loving arms.

"What can I do! Oh! love, love, would you have left me if you knew what I should have to suffer?"

No answer was returned to her passionate appeal, and after awhile, tired out in mind and body, she fell into a deep sleep, and dreamt she saw her lover stretched on the battle-field, stiff, and cold, with a bullet-hole in his temple, and his fair curls dabbled in blood.

After that night Rhona's life became harder to bear. Miss Rendell knowing there were grounds for her suspicions, kept her constantly at her side, and frequently lay traps for her, and talked unceasingly of the young lieutenant, trying to make her incriminate herself; but her purpose was read, and her victim was guarded and cautious. Yet it was a dreadful trial to bear the name she loved constantly on another's lips, and she became nervous and wretched, and felt a foreboding of evil whenever she thought of her ghastly dream. Her cheeks grew wan and pale, her eyes were sunken in the hollowed orbit, and her hands became almost transparent, and woefully thin. Life was torture, and at times she almost wished death would come and release her. A month later the Squire, as he opened the bag, drew out a letter with the Indian postmark. The superscription was not in his son's writing, and tearing it open with trembling hands, he read a few lines.

"Jocaasta! Clementine!" he cried, "Guy—is—wounded."

"Wounded!" they ejaculated simultaneously.

"Yes! Shot through the head, and—"

A dreadful shriek burst from Rhona's lips, and without a word she fell senseless at his feet.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, angrily.

"It means," replied Miss Rendell, coolly, "that she could not bear the news that her lover had been shot, so fainted to add to our troubles."

"Lover! My son!—my Guy!"

"Yes—lover."

"You must be out of your mind!"

"Not at all. Aunt, will you give directions for someone to carry her out of this room, then I will tell uncle all I know?"

And she did after the insensible form was borne off.

The Squire's rage was excessive; he almost forgot the letter he held in his hand until reminded of it by Clementine.

"Let us hear more about Guy. Is the wound serious?"

"Not very. The doctors think he will be all right in a few months."

"Then he will be invalided home. We shall see him before long?"

"I hardly think so. They say he must be kept very quiet for some time, or else his reason may be temporarily affected."

"How dreadful!"

"Dreadful, indeed! My poor—poor boy!" and the strong man broke down, and wept like a child.

Meanwhile Rhona had recovered from the fainting fit, but was deliciously crying out for Guy, her love! her own!

Miss Jocasta, hearing the cries, proceeded to her room and tried to quiet her, but her efforts were vain; and after a time she summoned her maid Wilson, and between them they managed to undress her, and get her into bed, and then forced a soothing potion between her clenched teeth.

"Will you stay and watch by her?"

"Yes, mem," acquiesced Wilson. "But before ye go, I sould like to say a word."

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Do ye know if Miss Rhona be married?"

"Married! Certainly not!"

"Then, mem, she o't to be."

"Ought to be! What do you mean?"

"She's goin' to have a child."

"Wilson!"

"It's true, mem; and I sould say Master Guy's to blame for it, fro' the way she's bin callin' after him."

"Oh! this is horrible! How shall I tell the Squire—and after the trouble of this morning, too?"

"That I don't know, mem; but he'll have to know, and the doctor sent for as well. She's near her time, I'm thinking."

With a gesture of dismay Miss Jocasta left the room to seek her brother. She found him in the study, looking haggard and weary, and in a few words told him the unwelcome news.

With a rush the blood flew up to his face, turning it almost black, the veins stood out on his brow like great cords, his teeth clenched, and for a moment she thought he would die; but he recovered himself almost immediately, and was for instantly seeing the culprit.

"It is useless," replied his sister, "she is asleep at present from the effects of a strong narcotic. You must wait till she wakes, and until after the doctor has seen her."

"No doctor shall see her!" he exclaimed, furiously. "We will keep our shame to ourselves."

"You must be responsible for her life, then."

"Her life! What do I care for that? She may die like a dog since she has disgraced us!"

"You seem to forget that Guy shares her disgrace."

"No, I don't. I don't forget anything—I wish I could. I will see her first, hear her story, then we must make arrangements to send her away at once."

"Yes, that will be the best plan if we have time."

"We must have time. Let me know when she wakes; if she is sensible I will go to her."

"Very well," and Miss Jocasta returned to the garret, and watched by the bedside till Rhona's grey eyes unclosed, and she looked up, sensible, the delirium having left her during that long sleep.

Seeing Miss Leigh by her side, she guessed that her secret had been discovered, and with a low moan covered her face with her hands.

"The Squire wishes to see you as soon as you are well enough—the sooner the better. If you can get up, Wilson will dress you; are you able?"

"Yea."

Without another word she arose, and suffered them to dress her and place her in a chair by a fire, which Wilson had lighted. The thought of the Squire's visit was horror

to her, yet it must be faced; and she did not attempt to detain the woman when she had ushered in her master, and then withdrew, leaving the old man and the young girl face to face.

She raised her eyes to his, but the rage in them made her cower. He seemed unable to speak; passion kept him silent, but at last he broke forth.

"Shameless creature! how is it that you dare to look at me? I wonder the disgrace of your position has not killed you—as it should! curse you!"

"Pity! pity!" she screamed, falling on her knees at his feet. "Do not curse me! Think of my unborn babe!"

"Think of it! Would you put forth that plea with me, miserable wretch?—me, the man you have disgraced, the man who took you out of charity, and finds he has nursed a viper in his bosom! Pity! Ask it of any but me!"

"Mercy! mercy!" she cried, writhing in agony.

"Why should I show you mercy, base ingrate," he demanded, with awful coldness. "Was there no one else you could find to cast your net on save my son—my boy, in whom I took such pride, whom I thought incapable of such an act as this. But the fault was yours. I know you bewitched him with your white face, drew him down into the whirlpool, and you shall suffer for it. Do you hear," he shouted, seizing her roughly by the arm, "you shall suffer for the sin you have committed."

"I have suffered for it," she murmured sadly, the tears raining down her pale cheeks, and falling on her clasped hands.

"And you shall suffer more. Listen. I will turn you from my doors. You shall starve; you shall leave King's Leigh never to return to it."

"No, no," she moaned; "wait—wait."

"For what?"

"Till he—till—Guy returns."

"It is likely, and what good would his return do you? It would not stay me. I should still drive you from my doors."

"He would not let you."

"He could not stop me."

"Then he would come with me and share my exile."

"And I would curse him, as I almost could curse him now for the black disgrace he has brought on my name."

"Stay—stay," she cried, as though fearful the curse would fall, "there is no disgrace."

"What do you mean?"

"Would Guy bring disgrace on any one? How little you know him. I—am—his—wife."

"You lie!" thundered the Squire.

"Indeed—indeed, I do not. See, here is the certificate of our marriage." With dilated eyes and pallid face he gazed at the paper which told him she spoke truly, told him that, to his way of thinking, a greater disgrace had fallen on him than he had dreamed of, and that all his castle-building with regard to a grand alliance for his heir was at an end.

"Mrs. Luxmoor knows it," she went on, "She was present at Dene Church when we were married. It is all quite legal, and my child will be legitimate."

"Your child!" he muttered, at last confoundedly, "your child! You, the offspring of a Contadina! a low Italian peasant, my daughter! Oh, no, no; it cannot be. It is false."

"It is true. I am your daughter."

"That you shall never be," he almost shrieked. "I spurn you, detestable spawn of a peasant, and I disown him. He is no son of mine if he clings to such as you. You will gain nothing by this, do not think so. Oh! Heaven, I could curse him for this disgrace and shame."

"No, no," she wailed, "not that, not that I will go—I will go. Anything rather than your curses for him."

"Go then, and I will forgive him."

"And me. Cannot you forgive me for his sake? I am his lawful wife."

She pleaded, lifting eyes so sad and tearful that they would have melted a stone.

"No," he answered sternly, without a shade of pity on his face. "I would forgive you less for being his wife than for being his mistress," and with these cruel words he wrenched himself from her detaining clasp, and left her lying prone along the cold stones which were not colder than his proud heart.

CHAPTER IV.

"FOR THY DEAR SAKE."

WHEN the first grey beams of the winter morn stole through the windows Rhona roused herself from the stupor of grief and misery which had kept her inactive. Slowly she rose, and commenced to gather together her few worldly possessions. She must go, must leave King's Leigh, her husband's home, and hers too. If wrong were right, for his dear sake she would become an outcast—for a while, at any rate. On his return all might be well, and if not—why, if not—she felt she would starve in the streets, rather than be beholden for her daily bread to the cruel merciless man who, showing no pity for her sad condition, had called down curses on her head, and on her unborn child. Her southern spirit was roused, dangerously roused; her soul was full of a mighty wrath against those who had treated her like something scarcely human, and while she tossed the few poor dresses she possessed into a bag her brain was busy—busy scheming out a plan of revenge on the Squire.

He had not gauged the depth and intensity of her feelings, this woman with the fair white English face, and fiery Italian nature. For the sake of her love, for the sake of remaining near him, she had borne much, which else would have been wholly insupportable to a woman of her temperament. Now all was over, the last shot fired, and she knew if she did not go that she would be driven like a mad dog from the house that had sheltered her for sixteen years.

"Give me vengeance, oh, Heaven! give me vengeance!" she murmured between her clenched teeth, as she concluded her preparations and throwing a cloak over her shoulders, rapidly descended the stairs, and let herself out.

It was a wild morning, and bitter winds lashed the leafless trees, and whirled round the old hall, making the weather vane groan like some restless spirit in torment. The air was sharp and penetrating; great masses of dark clouds swept across the sky; the whole place looked drear and spectral in the sickly light of early morn. The fugitive hardly noticed the storm-rack. Staggering against the rushing wind, which played round her, and tore at the heavy cloak she wore, she went on, on, slowly, wearily. She had only one hope, and that was that Mrs. Somerset, wife to the head gamekeeper on a neighbouring estate, would take her in till her child was born. Many little kindnesses had been shown her by this woman, and in this, her hour of necessity, she turned instinctively to her. On, on she plodded, through the sodden grass, and decayed leaves; on through the wood; where the bare trees looked like gaunt spectres. On, on, till she came to the little thatched roofed cottage, where dwelt the person she dared to hope might prove a good Samaritan.

With timid hand she knocked, and before the echo of her knock had died away, the door was opened by a buxom, fresh-faced, blue-eyed woman, who threw up her hands in astonishment, and exclaimed, "Miss Deverell!"

"Yes, Mrs. Somerset, it is I, Rhona Deverell. May I come in?"

"Come in! To be sure you may. Why, what ails you? You are deathly pale, and you tremble?"

"No wonder. Ah! if you know all," replied the wanderer, as she stepped in and stumbled from fatigue and faintness.

The four-mile walk in the blustering, damp,

chill morning had tried her failing strength terribly.

"I know all! Why, what is there to know? I am aware that you are not very much considered at the Leigh; that is no secret to the dwellers in these parts. But what has happened now? More neglect than usual?"

"They have turned me adrift!"

"Turned you adrift?"

"Ay. Thrust me out like a dog from the home that is mine by rights. Thrust me out to starve, to die maybe, of hunger and want; and then with many a tear, and many a falter, she told her story, and begged Mrs. Somerset to have pity on her, and let her stay till her child was born.

"I am not utterly penniless," she continued; "my husband left me fifty pounds, so I shall not be an expense to you; only let me stay, and I will bless you, and pray for you all my life long. I have nowhere to go," she urged, as the other remained silent; "be charitable, and take pity on me."

"I would at once, Miss Deverell," replied Mrs. Somerset, slowly, "only I expect myself in less than a month, and I don't see how it can be managed."

"It can, it can!" cried Rhona, eagerly. "My child will not be born till the end of April. You will be up and well before that, and I will tend you, and see to household matters while you are ill as no hiring would. Only let me stay; you will never regret it!"

"Well, then," agreed the keeper's wife, somewhat reluctantly, "so be it. If you will look after my husband's comfort for a week or two you can stay."

"Heaven bless you! Heaven bless you!" cried the poor girl, weeping hysterically, "you have saved me from self-destruction. I have not a friend in the world; there was nothing for me but a plunge in the river to end my troubles!"

"Hush! hush!" replied the kind-hearted woman, soothingly, "you must not talk like this. Think of your husband. Think what he is to you, more than a hundred friends!"

"Yes, yes. If he were here I should be quite content, my heart at rest. But even now he may be lying dead on the battle-field," she wailed. "He was wounded, badly wounded in the head. Oh! how shall I endure the agony of suspense. Mrs. Somerset, do you ever get a paper in this remote place?"

"Yes, often. Mr. Langhorn often gives Oswald the *Times*."

"Then I shall be able to watch, and see if he gets better. Do you think your husband could get it every day?"

"I daresay, we will ask him when he comes in. And now come upstairs to the spare room, and take off your cloak and make yourself comfortable. You must be famishing! Oswald will be in in a few moments, and breakfast is just ready," and together the two women went up to the tiny slope-roofed room, smelling so sweetly of lavender, where everything was snowy white, though of the coarsest texture; and Rhona made some little changes in her attire before descending to the kitchen, which served as a parlour as well, and was a cheerful, home-like apartment, with its red-tiled floor, rows of shining pewter and delft, and great fireplace, with cosy seats in the chimney-corner, one of which proved a tempting and comfortable resting-place to the tired wanderer that cold and cheerless morn.

As she sat there watching the cheery blaze leap up from the glowing embers, drinking the hot, comforting tea her hostess gave her, and eating a little morsel of some dainty, home-made cake, her spirits rose somewhat; the tears ceased to fall, and by the time Mr. Somerset arrived she was calm and self-contained, and answered his questions quietly. He warmly approved of his wife's decision, and seemed delighted to be able to stretch out a helping hand to Gay Leigh's wife.

Though holding only the lowly position of gamekeeper to Mr. Langhorn, he was a man of a handsome and aristocratic appearance, with an extremely melancholy expression, and

manners that were those of a perfect gentleman, easy and polished. Who he was no one knew.

Some ten years before the commencement of this story he had been recommended to his master by a friend, who gave him a high character for honesty, &c., and spoke of him as a thorough sportsman.

Mr. Langhorn, prepossessed in his favour by his manners and appearance, gave him at once the post of head gamekeeper, and found no cause to regret having done so, for a more efficient man had never filled the post.

Some two years later he married the daughter of a farmer, a man of many acres and much wealth, who had educated his child in the best and most finished way, in order that she might be a fitting match for some country gentleman, as he hoped the wealth he could give her would gain her such a spouse. But man proposes, &c.

Kate Dewberry met Oswald Somerset, fell in love with his dark, handsome face, and married him despite the sturdy opposition of her relatives, and despite the fact that the young man, for some unaccountable reason, hung back, and though evidently very fond of her, seemed to think he was doing her an injustice by marrying her.

She was of a different opinion, and the wedding took place, Old Dewberry saying next to nothing when he found she had made up her mind to make what he termed a "low match"; but he never gave her a farthing, and when he died six months after, he left all he possessed to a nephew, and Bonnie Kate was penniless.

This she did not mind in the least. She was perfectly happy with her handsome husband in their tiny thatched cottage, at least would have been perfectly happy save for one thing, and that one thing was the death of her babies.

(To be concluded in our next.)

THE GOLDEN HOPE.

—30:—

CHAPTER XLVII.—(continued.)

"Your ladyship can wipe out your cup, so as to make sure it ain't poisoned," said Luke, with an attempt at facetiousness. "You will excuse the lateness of the hour, but mother couldn't compel you to take it, and I have just got home—"

"You have been away, then, to-day?" interrupted Lady Redwoode. "I thought so. You have been to Redwoode?"

Luke was tempted to deny the assertion, but he reflected that it was not necessary to speak falsely to his prisoner now, as she was to die so soon. So he responded carelessly in the affirmative.

"You saw Mr. and Mrs. Forsythe?"

"I did, and the Indian woman besides."

"And Mr. Kenneth?" asked her ladyship, eagerly, a wild hope crossing her mind that the old lawyer might have seen Jenson, and suspected something of the truth.

"He wasn't at Redwoode," replied Luke, evasively. "He's been sent away. Mr. Forsythe's his own lawyer or manager, or whatever they call it, now. Mrs. Forsythe was wearing the deepest mourning, and her handkerchief looked as if it had been dipped in ink. Poor creature! She was a taking on—"

"And you told her I still lived?" cried the Baroness. "What did she say?"

Luke replied by a significant smile, and the words,—

"I don't know as it'll do any harm to tell your ladyship the truth. Your daughter concluded it would be a pity to waste all her mourning, to say nothing of her tears, and so—well, you are not wanted back at Redwoode. You are to stay here for the term of your

nat'ral life. Now drink a cup of tea immediately!"

A spasm of pain convulsed the features of the Baroness. Mrs. Jenson was appalled by it. She crept nearer to her son, and twined his garments, intending to plead for her ladyship's life. Her movement disengaged Luke's newly-acquired purse from his pocket, and it fell to the floor. He hastened to pick it up and restored it to its hiding-place, but not before Lady Redwood's eyes had caught sight of it.

"I made that purse for Andrew Forsythe," she said, with the paleness of utter despair. "He has given it to you to-day with the price of my life within it. How I have been deceived—"

She hesitated, and her despair gave way to a sudden glow and transport of joy. She forgot her impending fate, her threatening enemies, everything but a sudden blissful assurance that swept over her soul in one great tidal wave.

"The question is settled at last!" she murmured, in a tone inaudible to the two listeners, as if she were speaking to her own soul. "My instinct was at fault. Circumstances have declared the blessed truth. Cecile is not my child. Hellice, the wronged, innocent Hellice—I know she is wronged and innocent—is the child of my bosom, the child of my hopes and prayers. Imbecile that I was not to see in Hellice the image of my young husband. Her eyes are like Rolf Avon's—her voice is his. By heavens! why have I been blinded to the truth till now?"

She felt strangely faint and giddy with her grand discovery. The truth—for such she felt it to be—almost overwhelmed her. Her maternal instincts—so long dormant or stifled—aroused themselves, and verified the declarations of her reason.

Hellice was her own and only child. In that hour she knew it!

Like a chilling blast upon all her ardour and warmth of feeling, came the words of Luke Jenson,—

"If your ladyship has rejoiced enough over the news I have brought, perhaps you'll take the tea before it gets cold!"

Lady Redwoode was immediately recalled to the scene around her.

"I want no tea!" she said, endeavouring to speak calmly, although joyful and exultant thrills pulsed through her veins, and refused to be immediately subdued. "Leave me to myself—"

"You ask impossibilities," replied Luke, grimly. "If you refuse to drink the tea peaceably I shall pour it down your throat—there!"

"It is poisoned, then?" said the Baroness, sternly. "I thought so. Cecile has sent me a last gift in the shape of an Indian drug. You have put it in the teapot?"

Mrs. Jenson's countenance was sufficient reply.

The Baroness was thoughtful for a moment. She was much stronger than her enemies suspected, and she was resolved to sell her life dearly. She would never drink the poisoned beverage of her own will. But how could she protect herself, how outwit her enemies?

Mrs. Jenson pulled at her son's sleeve.

"It is three o'clock," she whispered. "I heard the hall clock just strike. Let it go till to-morrow, Luke—"

While Luke's attention was thus momentarily diverted, Lady Redwoode had formed her plan. With a quick spring she gained the little table, caught up the earthen teapot, and dashed it into the open grate, where it fell into fragments, the poisoned beverage trickling in streams over the hearth.

Jenson turned from his mother, uttering a volley of curses. His brute nature was uppermost at that moment.

"You have refused a peaceable death!" he cried, nearly beside himself with rage. "You must die now, and in a way not quite so agreeable. Mother, lock the door and stand against it! Now we'll settle this business!"

He drew from beneath his waistcoat a poniard, which he was wont to carry about his person, and with which he had oftentimes protected himself in fights with fishermen along the coast. With this formidable weapon he advanced upon his victim, clutching her arm. She broke from him, caught up a knife from the table to protect herself, rushed to the window, broke a pane of glass, and through the aperture shrieked long and wildly for help.

Her cry was so unexpected and so unearthly that Jensen involuntarily staggered back.

Lady Redwoode prolonged and repeated her startling cry.

Hark! Was that an answer that came up from below?

CHAPTER XLVIII.

I cannot speak, tears so obstruct my words
And choke me with unutterable joy.—*Otway.*

HELICE, by reason of her long voyage from India, was an excellent sailor, so she decided to remain upon deck throughout her night-sail on the *Auld Ailsie*. The early evening was very pleasant. The night had come on early, and the soft gloom of a prolonged twilight mantled the shores and waters. The dash of the waves, the scattering of the salt spray, had in them something inspiring. The wind was astern, strong, fierce, and sweeping, promising a speedy and successful termination to the journey.

Hellice took possession of the seat prepared for by her attentive lover, and nestled in her Indian shawl, peaceful and content, but for the great shadow that had fallen upon her heart, with the tidings of Lady Redwoode's death. She inflicted no moans nor sighs of pain upon Sir Richard. She smiled up at him brightly, and manifested a spirit of cheerfulness, yet he knew how sore heart was within her bosom, and how heavily and terribly she had been stricken.

"We shall have a splendid night, Hellice," said the young Baronet, hovering about her with delicate and unobtrusive attentions. "See, my uncle is learning navigation!" and smiled. "We may look out for a new machine by which to move through the water."

He paused, Mr. Haughton's voice, eager and excited, breaking in upon his words. The poor gentleman was declaring that he should invent a fish-shaped boat, to be propelled under the water, coming up occasionally as whales do for air, and that this invention would revolutionize the world.

Even Hellice was obliged to smile at his extravagance, and she expressed a hope that the invention would not be brought into general use in her day.

At this juncture, the captain of the *Ailsie* approached the young couple, doffing his cap respectfully.

"At this rate, sir," he said, "we shall be at the Round Bay by midnight. It's only a matter o' fifty miles. I've been that way often by way of a cruise."

"I thought the distance was greater," said Sir Richard. "We are fortunate in having so brief a journey, so swift a sloop, and such able seamen."

The captain was pleased with the compliment, but answered, with affected indifference, "The seamen's so-so, sir, but the *Auld Ailsie* is a beauty, and no mistake. There aint no craft on the coast of her size that can distance her, and I'm glad o' that, for we're likely to want her to show her legs. You see, sir, I've been hearin' tell how the young lady here has been pursued by t' Rookery chaps, and I've an idea that they've flitted out a sloop here, and are coming out to attack us as we approach."

"They would hardly dare to do that, I think," said Sir Richard, thoughtfully, disturbed, in spite of himself.

"Dare!" said the skipper. "According to what I hear there ain't nothin' but what that Indian chap would dare! He's played robber, they say, and a man that'll play rob-

ber will play pirate if he can get the chance. There's no vessels cruisin' this way, and there don't happen to be any fishing craft in the vicinity."

"Let us go back, Richard," pleaded Hellice. "You and Mr. Haughton and these sailors must not be endangered on my account."

"But, Hellice, you are not safe at the manse. It will not be safe for us to proceed to a railway station unguarded. I know of no mode of travel so easy for us as this. We will keep on—unless the captain here wishes to turn back."

"Then we'll keep on!" declared the owner of the sloop. "There's nothin' I like better than a scrimmage now and then. I feel just in the humour for one to-night. I may be mistaken after all, but if that Indian fellow is bent on having the girl, nothing's easier for him than to buy a sloop, hire a fisherman or two to manage it, and then put his men aboard and chase us. I wish he may try it."

"Mr. Anchester would hardly dare be so lawless," said Sir Richard, musingly. "He has men, instead of a weak girl, to deal with now. Yet—how are we off for arms, captain?"

"I've got the two nature gave me, sir, and they're in prime order," replied the skipper, flourishing his brawny, stalwart members.

"I did not mean to be understood so literally," replied the Baronet, smiling. "I have a couple of revolvers, and my uncle is similarly provided for. You can take one, if necessary, and—"

"I can take another!" said Hellice, determinedly. "Do not object, Richard. One of the men must mind the tiller. The fourth weapon would be unused but for me. I shot a tiger once in India—I did, indeed—and you need not fear that I would shrink from shooting a creature more bloodthirsty than a tiger, when my life depended upon my freedom!"

"Poor little valiant!" said the Baronet, in a caressing under-tone. "You would protect your life and honour, but I shall be able to do it for you. That little hand shall never be raised in self-defence, while I have a spark of life remaining. Trust in me, my darling. I will nerve my arm to know that you are leaning upon it!"

Hellice answered by a look of perfect love and trust. She made no further allusion to her power of self-defence, feeling a serene confidence in the strength and ability of her lover to defend her.

Sir Richard deemed it prudent to make all preparations for defence. He examined his pistols and distributed them to the best advantage. He gave his uncle instructions, which Mr. Haughton received with martial ardour, promising to distinguish himself with coolness and bravery, in the event of an engagement.

The man at the tiller received his orders, and the promise of a handsome reward for his services, provided he should keep at his post.

The Baronet also engaged himself to double the skipper's liberal pay in case of an attack from Mr. Anchester, and to make good any damage that might occur to the *Auld Ailsie*.

Matters being thus arranged, nothing remained but to await the issue.

The sloop flew on before the wind, which, had it not been fair, must have been termed a gale. The white-crested waves flew past as if they had been live creatures in deadly fear. The soft night-gloom deepened. A few stars appeared in the leaden sky.

The coast, so rugged, so full of heavy rocks and boulders, looked grim, strange and spectral. The fishermen's cottages, nestled here and there on the sands, looked like dark mounds, fit only for the habitation of strange and unreal beings.

On flew the sloop like a live thing. The hamlet, the manse, the parish church, were all left behind. Coves, bays and indentations all disappeared behind them. The cove which Hellice had once visited with Sandy, the spot where Mr. Anchester had asked her to become his wife, was approached.

This cove was protected by two long arms reaching out into the sea, two arms piled high with rocks that completely concealed whatever might be within.

Perhaps Mr. Anchester lay at the entrance like a spider watching for its prey! Perhaps at the moment they came abreast of him, he would rush out and drag them to his den, as the cove might be called. For Sir Richard and his men there was no danger save in open encounter. For Hellice—

"He is there! He is there! I feel it!" whispered the maiden, in sudden agitation. "Oh, for a friendly cloud to hide us from his view!"

By a single gesture, Sir Richard commanded his uncle and the men to be on their guard. The man at the tiller nodded significantly. Mr. Haughton and the skipper held their weapons ready for instant use.

"Go down into the cabin, my darling," whispered the Baronet to his betrothed. "Should there be an attack, you are in danger here."

Hellice hesitated a moment. She was inclined to share her lover's dangers to the utmost, but a reflection that her presence might unnervise him decided her to obedience. She arose quietly, and allowed him to escort her to the close little cabin, from which he promised to release her at the earliest possible moment.

In the little doorway he paused to gather her in his arms and bid her trust in him, then he went back to his duties, leaving her to solitude and prayer.

"The young lady's wish has come true," was the whispered salutation of the skipper, as he emerged on the deck. "It's darker than it was, and we're at some distance from the shore. We may get past after all without trouble."

It was true that the sky had clouded over, but the shadows would soon be past, and the brightness greater than before by contrast. To take advantage of the temporary gloom became at once the object of the voyagers.

The sloop was straining under every stitch of canvas. She was at a little distance from the projecting points of lands. She had greatly the advantage of any hidden enemy, and her skipper was resolved to maintain it.

They approached the first point. They shot past it. They flew on through the gloom and the foaming waves.

"We are safe!" cried Mr. Haughton. "There's no sloop there!"

Even as he spoke, out sprang from the shadows a sloop, every sail set. She darted in swift pursuit. Her size was nearly that of the *Auld Ailsie*, and a half-score of men crowded her deck.

Conspicuous among these men was the giant form of Mr. Anchester.

"Heave to, there!" he shouted. "Heave to, I say!"

"What for?" asked the *Auld Ailsie*'s skipper, tantalizingly.

"I want my wife. She's on board your craft. Yield her up, or I'll sink you."

"His wife!" said Sir Richard, absolutely startled at Mr. Anchester's audacity. "The miserable villain! Make him no answer, captain. We've got the start of him. Show him the heels of the *Ailsie*!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" said the well-pleased skipper. "We've got the start of him, as you say. 'A stern chase is a long chase,' as the sayin' is. I know that boat he's got. It's a decentish one, sir, as boats go, but she can't hold a candle to the *Ailsie*!"

The comparative merits of the two vessels was to be put to the test. Annoyed at the contemptuous silence with which his demand had been met, Mr. Anchester was put to the extremity of savage recklessness. He was determined that the prize he so longed for should not elip through his hands. He would risk everything to obtain Hellice again—for to lose her would be to him absolute ruin!

He gave his orders fiercely, and his men—seamen and Rookery labourers—were eager to

do his bidding, he having not only assured them that he simply sought to obtain possession of his lawfully-married wife, but promised them immunity from the laws, and a handsome sum of money, in case of Hellice's recovery.

On the one vessel was courageous resistance to wrong; on the other a complete and reckless desperation.

The pursuer held a course nearer to the land, where the wind was less sweeping, and the *Ailsie* thus gained upon her. Mr. Anchester ordered the sloop to shoot out into the track of the chase, by which movement he lost time, and gave the *Ailsie* still farther the advantage.

Sir Richard and his companions marked this favouring circumstance with delight and satisfaction.

"We're leaving her behind!" said the skipper. "Ah!"

This exclamation was caused by a shot that came whizzing from the pursuing sloop, passing in close proximity to his ear.

"Will you heave to, there?" cried Mr. Anchester, in a wild and savage shout. "If you won't, take that!"

Another shot whizzed past the man at the tiller, causing him to assume an involuntary crouching posture.

"They're tryin' to pick Tom off," cried the skipper. "Keep your head down, Tom. It won't do to lose your life now that you have got a chance to make it comfortable."

Tom acknowledged the justice of this remark by presenting as small a target to the enemy as was possible.

It seemed as though the captain of the *Ailsie* had overrated the speed of his vessel, for it soon became apparent that the pursuer was gaining on the chase. It bounded over the waters like a bird with outstretched wings, and the *Ailsie* flew ahead with swift but flourishing motion, as if overcome by fright.

"They are certainly gaining!" said the Baronet, uneasily.

"Still, a stern chase 's a long chase," replied the captain, an axiom which evidently afforded him considerable comfort. "I didn't think there was so much life in that craft!"

On along the shadowy coast, through the light gloom sped the two vessels. They passed fishing villages and hamlets, wrapped in darkness, without observing them. The wind increased, rendering their speed absolutely fearful, to any in less danger or less excitement than they.

Mr. Anchester seemed mad with desperation, and Sir Richard stood up, calm and resolute, encouraging his men, and determined to resist his enemy to the death.

Again and again came the cry to heave to. Again and again came rifle-shots from the pursuing sloop. Still no injury had been done, and still the owner and seaman of the *Ailsie* were strong in their determination to stand by their passengers.

The strange chase was continued for hours, and the pursuer continued to gain on the pursued. A wild elation began to burn in Mr. Anchester's heart. He towered head and shoulders above his men, his face white with rage, his black locks blowing wildly in the wind, and his entire appearance more demonic than human.

"Give me my wife!" he shouted, at last, his voice sounding directly in the ears of the Baronet, so close had he approached the *Ailsie*. "If you longer refuse, I'll riddle your old sloop, and take the girl by force."

"Do it, if you can!" replied Sir Richard.

"The girl belongs to me, Sir [Richard Haughton!]" cried Mr. Anchester, hoarsely.

"She was married to me in the Rookery chapel. She fled from me at the very altar—but she is my wife, and all the powers of earth cannot take her from me! Do not tempt me too far. I'm a desperate man—"

"A desperate animal, you'd better say!" said Mr. William Haughton, unable to keep

silence longer. "You had better not tempt me too far, Mr. Anchester. It seems that there are two of us can handle weapons—"

Mr. Anchester cut the remark short by a pistol-shot.

The distance between the vessels had so diminished that words in an ordinary tone could be heard from one to the other. The two miserable rifles that Mr. Anchester had been able to pick up at the Rookery were of no further use. There were plenty of pistols, however, on the pursuing craft, several of them having been obtained at the nearest town, after Mr. Anchester's adventure with Sir Richard. These weapons were now to be brought into requisition.

"You absolutely refuse to yield up the girl?" shouted Mr. Anchester.

Sir Richard replied only by a contemptuous silence.

"Then give it to 'em, my lads!" commanded the East Indian, hoarse with rage. "Fire all at once. Fire!"

A hailstorm of bullets rattled around the Baronet and his companions. The bullets embedded themselves in the bulwarks, skimmed over the deck, tore through the sails, and buried themselves in the waters.

Sir Richard and his assistants returned the compliment immediately.

"No one hurt yet on this side, Mr. Anchester!" cried Mr. Haughton, full of excitement, his eyes fairly blazing as he marked the wild disappointment of the East Indian.

"Take that, with my compliments!" He sent his last bullet towards the adventurer.

A bowl of pain followed, announcing that it had fulfilled its mission.

Mr. Anchester's giant form was observed to topple and fall into the outstretched arms of his men. A cry of dismay arose from the pursuers.

Their leader had been wounded—dangerously wounded—as was evident at the first glance.

In a moment all was wild disorder on the little craft.

Mr. Anchester, the blood welling from his breast, whispered hoarsely his orders to renew the attack, but he was not obeyed. He lay on the deck pale and helpless. Their leader disabled, the men had neither heart nor object in continuing the assault. They clustered around him, stanching his wounds, and offering him liquor, but they were disheartened and dispirited.

That shot of Mr. Haughton's had ended the pursuit.

The *Ailsie*, taking advantage of the enemy's confusion, sprang away with renewed courage. A few minutes put them beyond danger of being overtaken, but Sir Richard and his friends were none the less pleased to observe that Mr. Anchester's vessel had headed inshore, and that farther efforts to overtake them had been abandoned.

"I put them out of their calculations," said Mr. Haughton, with much self-complacency. "Mr. Anchester had no idea that he was to encounter such a man as I am. The fact is quite evident!"

"Mr. Anchester being wounded, his men dare not pursue us farther," said Sir Richard.

"Of course they have no object in Miss Glintwick's capture. They simply wished to earn their promised reward, but, the reward being endangered by Mr. Anchester's illness, nothing remains for them but to go back."

"They won't try it with this wind," said the skipper. "They'll have to put into some bay till the wind changes. That's the very thing they are doing. There's no danger now, sir. The young lady can come up."

The Baronet hastened to the cabin. He found Hellice kneeling. When he gently lifted her to her feet, he saw that her face was very pale and anxious, and that her eyes were like walls of glowing fire.

"You are not hurt, Richard?" she asked, tremulously.

"Not hurt, my darling!" he answered, folding her to his broad breast, with yearning

tenderness. "No one on board this vessel is hurt. We have been mercifully preserved throughout, from all harm."

"Thank Heaven!" said Hellice, so fervently that her aspiration was a prayer.

"How could we be hurt when you were down here praying for us?" asked her lover, with tears springing to his eyes. "We are safe, my darling. Our last peril is past, and henceforth our lives are to be united in one glad, tranquil stream. The shadows are fled from us for ever. Let us welcome the glorious sunshine of love!"

"Forgive me, Richard," said the maiden; "but in the midst of my joy and happiness, one thing is lacking. I want Lady Redwoode. I miss her so."

"Let us hope, if spirits can return to earth, that she is with us at this moment," said the Baronet, reverently. "But, Hellice," he added, after a moment's silence, "you haven't asked me about our enemies yet. Mr. Anchester was wounded. How severely I do not know, but badly enough to discourage his followers. You must come up and congratulate my uncle on his marksmanship. He is as vain as a peacock, and plumes himself on having saved us all. Come!"

He gently drew her to the deck.

Hellice complimented Mr. Haughton to his content, praised the skipper and the faithful Tom, and then resumed her seat, wrapping herself in her shawl, and nestling her head upon her lover's faithful breast.

The remainder of the voyage was without incident. The wind kept up its strength and fury, yet, notwithstanding its power, and the predictions of the worthy skipper, it was past two o'clock when the sloop rounded into the cove nearest Sorel Place.

"I miscalculated the distance," observed the captain. "It'll be impossible for me to go back while this wind holds. Hadn't you better sleep aboard, miss?"

"I would rather go up to the village, thank you," returned Hellice, anxious to avoid a night in the unwholesome little cabin. "I shan't mind the walk!"

Sir Richard acquiesced in this decision. He paid the skipper and Tom double what he had promised them, and the grateful fishermen hastened to row their passengers ashore, and stood bowing after them long after the party had passed up the road.

"The road that passes Sorel Place, where Lady Redwoode passed her last night on earth leads us to the village," said the Baronet, drawing Hellice's arm within his own, and gently compelling her to lean heavily upon him. "It's several miles to the village, and it may be better for us to seek lodgings at a farm-house."

"Or at Sorel Place?" suggested Mr. Haughton, who was carrying Hellice's few effects on his arm. "If it were good enough for her, it's good enough for us!"

This suggestion met with favour from the lovers. Sorel Place would be near to the sea, and Hellice desired to visit the vicinity of the Pool in the morning. They decided, therefore, to make application for shelter at Sorel Place, and Hellice felt a mournful pleasure in the thought that the chamber last occupied by Lady Redwoode might be assigned to her.

(To be continued.)

CHRISTMAS CAROLS.—The origin of carols is somewhat curious. The word is derived from the Italian *carola*, a song of joy, and was in the first instance employed to designate a song sung as an accompaniment to dancing. Christmas carols were early introduced into the Christian Church. According to Tertullian, it was customary for them at their feasts to place in the middle such as could sing, and call upon them to praise God in a hymn, either out of the Scriptures or of their own composition. Religious songs or ballads are still sung in many parts of England, and especially in the streets of the great towns.

FACETIÆ.

For whosoever eats mince-pie will not digest—he will jest die.

The man who peddles his autobiography takes his life in his own hands.

It ain't whut er man is dat makes him happy in dis yere worl'. It's whut he thinks he is.

"I OFTEN cut my oldest acquaintance," said the buzz-saw, as it took off a mill-hand's finger.

WIFE (to painter husband): "Hugh, if I died, what would you do?" Hugh: "Paint the cemetery red."

WILL: "My mother-in-law fellover Niagara Falls last week." Phil: "I told you horse-shoes were lucky."

"It is a singular fact," mused old Professor Wimple, "that the man who is always in a pickle doesn't preserve his temper worth a farthing!"

"I NEVER could understand why you married Mr. Brown, dear. He is not fit to tie your shoes." "I didn't marry him dear, to tie them."

SHE: "How much did you drink to-day? Mind now, swear to tell the truth." He: "I swear! Only enough to fill an egg-shell." (Aside.) "Ostrich egg."

JUDGE: "Did your mother-in-law ever resort to personal violence?" Witness: "If personal violence is flinging me out of the fourth-story window, well—yes."

HE: "Did you enjoy the sermon?" She: "Of course I did. I had on a new hat and dress, and the pew-opener seated me directly in front of that dreadful Miss Briggs."

UNCLE JOHN: "Why, my girl, you've grown like a cucumber vine! What progress are you making towards matrimony?" Clara: "Well, uncle, I'm on my fifth lap."

THE FARMER'S APPLES.—Hundreds of bushels of apples may lie rotting under a tree in an orchard, and yet when the owner of the fruit surprises a small boy under the trees, filling his pockets with apples, he will chase him half a mile and make him disgorge.

"Oh, Tom," she whispered, after the momentous question had been propounded. "I am so happy! Papa and brother Frank have been teasing me awfully about you lately, and besides, I'm the first girl of our graduating class to be engaged."

"I SUPPOSE those bells are sounding an alarm of fire," sneeringly said a man, as the church bells were calling the worshippers one Sunday morning; to which a clergyman who was passing replied: "Yes, my friend, but the fire is not in this world."

"I've just found out why lightning never strikes twice in the same place," said Farmer Furrow to the deacon, as they stood under a tree during a thunderstorm. "Why is it?" said the deacon. "Because, sir, the same place is never there after the lightning once hits it."

APPLICANT: "Is this the place to apply for a pension? I'm an old soldier, sir, and up to the present time I haven't asked the government to give me a penny. Now I want assistance." Pension Agent: "You want a back pension?" "Certainly; that's where I was shot."

An old bachelor, who had long sought to find a woman that, as he used to say, "would be a fitting mate," at last found her in a railway carriage, and took a seat by her side. She was young and innocent in appearance, and after a short time the bachelor softly whispered to her: "Are you married, my dear?" "Me married?" she cried, in tones that rung through the carriage. "Me married? No, but I've sued a feller for breach of promise!" The bachelor left the train the first station it stopped at.

THE woman who carries on her husband's pawn-shop, after his decease, is truly a "loan widow."

"WHAT kind of boys go to heaven?" asked a Sunday-school superintendent. "Dead boys!" shouted a new scholar who had been brought in from the street.

An old philosopher says that he has often seen a man pleased at being thought to be in advance of his age; but he never heard of a woman who was pleased at being supposed to be in advance of her age.

"I AM going to write a work on Popular Ignorance," said a young graduate to an old professor. "I am glad of it," replied the old man. "I don't know anybody who has more of the root of that matter in him."

"How's business?" asked a reporter of a court-plaster manufacturer. "It's been good; but we are preparing to shut down now for the winter." "Shut down! Why is that?" "Why, you see, the football season is over."

"WHAT are your intentions in regard to my daughter, sir?" demanded old Rascible. "My intentions?" echoed Da Smythe. "Why, what do you mean?" "Didn't you ask her to marry you?" "Yes, but that was at a summer-resort."

"RESTORATION."—Scene: Police court. Judge (to prisoner): "You say you found this bank-bill?" "Yes, your honour." "And you did not restore it?" "I did, your honour." "To its owner?" "No, your honour—to circulation."

MR. WINKS (with affected disgust): "Whew! This mince-pie is terribly strong." Mrs. Winks: "Yes, Bridget got too much brandy in the mince-meat this time." Little Nell: "Aint it funny? Smells just like pa's moustache did when you was away."

TOURIST: "Will you reopen your summer hotel next season?" Summer Landlord: "I shall be here, but not as the lessee. I have obtained a job as head-waiter." "Eh? You don't say so? Who will be the lessee, then?" "The head-waiter I had this season."

BIRDIE McHENRIN: "There is something very weird and mysterious about the midnight hour." McGinnis: "Yes. I have noticed that if you wake up in the middle of the night an uncertain feeling comes over you. You ain't sure whether it is yesterday or to-morrow."

"JOHN," said a farmer's wife, "afore we start for home I think I'd ought to have that tooth pulled out. It's ached the hull day." "I know, Mariar," replied John, dubiously; "but by the time we git that jug filled an' the plug terbacker we hain't going to have much left to spend on luxuries."

DELIA having accepted Richard's offer of marriage, the romantic lover exclaimed: "Oh, my darling! my cup of joy is full—very full!" At which a red-nosed man, who just then came staggering round the corner of the garden fence, solemnly said: "That's all very well, young man. If your cup is full, let 'er be full, but don't you go to changin' places with the cup, an' get full yourself."

A FACETIOUS bishop went to preach a charity sermon a short time ago in a country church. The resident clergyman, who was very young, received him, and, thinking to say something pretty, observed: "I am grieved that you should have to come on such a windy day!" but the youth found his grief misplaced when the bishop replied: "Tut, tut, my young friend. Didn't I come to raise the wind?"

A BURGLAR having completely disappeared from the surveillance of the police, a detective went to the wife of the criminal and asked her where her husband was. "He's gone," answered the wife. "Gone? Gone where?" "I never tell that; and, besides, I don't know." "But you must tell, or I'll arrest you." At this the wife bridled up, and said: "He's dead, but I don't know where's he's gone; and, if I did, I wouldn't tell you!"

YOUNG FRESH has called on Miss X, and been entertained with conversation and music till he is as dry as a grilled bone. Miss X (at the piano): "Would you like a little Beethoven, Mr. Fresh?" Young Fresh (eagerly): "Just a few drops, please!"

A POLICE reporter paper says: "A brutal husband was arraigned for pulling hair out of his wife's head. The hair was produced in court and weighed, and there was over two ounces of it; and it caused the brutal husband to take his way to jail for three months."

REGULAR CUSTOMER (disposed to be facetious): "Well! you will have to trust me for the paper until to-morrow." Clerk: "Oh, that's all right, sir!" Customer: "But suppose I was killed between now and to-morrow?" Clerk: "Well, the loss would not be much, sir."

ENGLISH tourist to German tourist: "You seem to have been greatly benefited by your sea voyage. German tourist: "Vell, mine vriendt, you vos see I been badder as goot as firedrade; budt ven I vos leave home, ooh, I been so bat all der doctors in der world could do me no harm!"

MRS. WALDO (who is entertaining young Mr. Wabash): "I have a treat for you to-day, Mr. Wabash, in the way of some broiled bivalves. My husband is very fond of them." Young Mr. Wabash (trying one): "They are certainly delicious, Mrs. Waldo. They taste something like oysters."

A POMPUS school-inspector, in addressing the "advanced class" of a school, said: "Scholars, I have an impression—and, by the way, what is an impression?" "A dent in a soft spot," answered one of the pupils; at which the teacher exclaimed: "Come, come, children, no personal remarks," and the pompous inspector sat down.

SENSASHUNS.

A MAN has no right to be proud, even ov a good deed. Let him humble himself before it, for he kant tell how long it will be before he will do a mean one.

Canning and wisdom are often confounded; but there iz nothing so plenty az cunning, nor nothing so skarse az wisdom.

Men ov real knowledge are more anxious to git sum more than they are to sho what they hav got.

A yung flatterer iz very apt to end in being an old knave.

If you are going to make amnzements a stiddy bizzness, chasing butterflys iz just az sensible az enny.

All theze men who hav acquired a fortune and kept it, owe more to ekonomy than to shrewdness.

I never hav known, nor never expekt to know, a lazy man who did not attribit all hiz misfortunes to bad luk.

Don't sighn enny man's note, not even yure own.

The wages ov sin are just what old Nick takes a noshun to pay.

There iz lots ov people who, if they should miss their morning paper, wouldn't kno mutch ov ennything for that day.

A good companyunn iz one who ministers to our foibles, and who iz willing to be gently snubbed at enny time.

Connubial bliss konsists in being tied fast to yure wife's apron strings, and paying promptly all her bills.

Ded sure things are plenty in this world; one ov them iz, when both ov a man's feet fly out from under him and he sits down sudden and square on the ice, where the water iz about a quarter ov an inch thick.

A "clear conscience" iz one ov them kind ov things that no haz ever had yet.

He that lives virtually haz lived long enuff, let him die when he will.

I never heard yet ov two persons seeing the same ghost at the same time.

JOHN BILLINGS.

SOCIETY.

HAVING been born in Scotland, one might naturally expect the Royal Baby, says *Modern Society*, to be named after one of Scotland's daughters or heroines, out of compliment to the land of the mountain and the flood. The fact of the event having come off over the border may be thought sufficiently flattering in itself. We made a good guess at the name of the boy Prince, but this time we are not so sure of it. Perhaps the fœta lately made about Mary Queen of Scots may lead to the adoption of the pretty name of Mary, as it happens no one but the Princess of Teck enjoys among the Royalties so simple and homely a name. The most appropriate name to give would be Margaret, the name of the noble Queen of Scotland, and for once, if it be done, surely the German fashion of tacking on half-a-dozen others of grandmothers, aunts, and cousins might be set aside. Margaret, without the ridiculous additions of Victoria, Beatrix Alexandra, Helena, or Irene would sound Princely enough. The 23rd November was finally fixed for the ceremony, the Queen leaving for the South on the following day.

Spain has cut out France in Jubilee "offerings," in spite of the tiara; the Spanish pilgrims will number 30,000, and 140 large cases of presents have been sent from Spain to the Vatican. Some of these cases contain wine, and the Italian Government has raised a fuss about this, saying that wines were an import not included in the *carte blanche* otherwise given to the Pope's presents.

The Duchess of Edinburgh, or Madame Rolfe, as she prefers it while travelling, has been spending a week in Rome. She received only the British and Russian Ambassadors. If she wished to keep her visit strictly private, why did she not intimate to them on a post-card that she would dispense with their attentions on this occasion? Her Imperial and Royal Highness doubtless finds it cheaper to go about as the unknown, as Italian hotel keepers are not above making the most of their opportunities. But where was her hubby all the time? Perhaps Monsieur Rolfe also likes going alone and doing the cheap.

The King and Queen of Italy have recently returned to Rome. Their son is also with them, and is to take the oaths as a member of the Senate on account of having attained his eighteenth year. But he will not be considered to have attained his majority for some time yet, as King Humbert is very anxious that he should go on quietly with his education. He is to go on a visit to Austria and Germany, and perhaps also to Sweden; and it is not until next year that His Royal Highness will have a separate establishment and an income of his own. The Consulta Palace, at present the residence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, has to be got ready for the Prince's occupation.

The Gaekwar of Baroda, fresh from his Hindoo home, has rented three adjoining mansions at Brighton which will all be made to connect on every floor. The reason of this precaution for his Gaekwarship's comfort is that forty bed-rooms are required to accommodate the ladies of his suite. These ladies, many of whom are his wives, are said to be very beautiful and to carry on their necks, arms, and ankles enough gold and precious stones to pay off a good-sized national debt. A number of safe Hindoo attendants, armed to the teeth, patrol the passages of the rooms to see that, on the one hand, no adventurous Englishman gets in under any pretence, and, on the other hand, that none of the ladies get out, bangles or no bangles. The Gaekwar will remain in Brighton through the fashionable winter season.

GEMS.

CHOOSE the right way, however rough; it will certainly prove easier than the wrong way. THAT clarity is bad which takes from independence its proper pride or from begging its shame.

FAITHFULNESS is a higher attainment than mere success; and, unlike success, it is within the reach of every man.

CHRISTIANITY is the companion of liberty in all its conflicts, the cradle of its infancy and the divine source of its claims.

WHAT is experience? A poor little hut constructed from the ruins of the palace of gold and marble called our illusions.

FOR the best results there needs be the longest waiting. The true harvest is the longest in being reached. The failures come first, and the successes last.

NEVER hold anyone by the button or the hand in order to be heard out, for if people are unwilling to hear you, you had better hold your tongue than them.

FACTION is the excess and abuse of party. It begins when the first idea of private interest preferred to public good gets footing in the heart. It is always dangerous, yet always contemptible.

WE praise the things we hear with much more willingness than those we see, because we envy the present and reverence the past, thinking ourselves instructed by the one, and overlaid by the other.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

CHRISTMAS PLUM PUDDING.—Beef suet, one pound, chopped fine; raisins, one pound, stoned; flour, four tablespoonfuls; salt, one teaspoonful; loaf sugar, pounded, six ounces; half a nutmeg, grated. Mix with five eggs—yolks and whites, but no other liquid. Boil six hours.

TEA-CAKE.—Two teaspoonfuls of sugar, one teaspoonful of butter, one teaspoonful and a half of milk, and two eggs; dissolve half a teaspoonful of soda in the milk and mix enough flour with these ingredients to make a paste that will roll handily; cut out with a biscuit cutter, and bake.

TURKEYS AND GESE.—At this season a few hints as to choosing these favourite birds may not be out of place. An old Turkey has rough and reddish legs; a young one smooth and black. Fresh killed, the eyes are full and clear, and the feet moist. When it has been kept too long, there is a greenish, discoloured appearance about the belly and thighs. Geese: The bills and feet are red when old, yellow when young. Fresh-killed, the feet are pliable; stiff when kept too long. Geese are called green when only two or three months old.

TWELFTH-CAKE.—One pound of fresh butter, beaten to a cream, the same quantity of sifted sugar, and a little lemon zest; add six eggs, two at a time, two pounds of currants, half a pound of orange, lemon, and citron peel, and, lastly, stir in a pound and a quarter of flour. Trim it neatly round the sides and top with a sharp kitchen-knife until even. When nearly cold ice over with sugar, spread carefully over; ornament with an emblematical figure in the centre, with *bon-bons*, liqueur ornaments, &c. Fasten them with icing, introducing a little piping in coloured icing between the ornaments.

MINCEMEN.—An old family receipt. Beef suet chopped fine, one pound; raisins, one pound, ditto, stoned; currants, one pound; apples chopped fine, one pound; two or three eggs; allspice, beat very fine, and sugar to your taste; a little suet, and as much brandy and wine as you like. A small piece of citron in each pie is an improvement.

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE finer the nature, the more flaws will it show through the clearness of it. The best things are seldomest seen in their best form. The wild grass grows well and strongly one year with another; but the wheat is, by reason of its greater nobleness, liable to a bitter blight.

THE NAME OF CHRISTMAS, AND ITS ORIGIN.—Christmas is not, as has been supposed, so called on account of the religious performances held on that day; but the word is compounded of the name of the Saviour and the Anglo-Saxon "mas," a feast, or holiday. The festivities which characterised the day among our ancestors have, for the most part, passed away. They were derived from pagan customs hallowed by the Church, and the curious will find a detailed account of them in "Brande's Popular Antiquities." Yule, the ancient name of Christmas, seems to have been a festival among the Romans, Saxons, and Goths, in commemoration of the winter solstice, and the lengthening of the days, and was afterwards kept up by the Christians. The decking of churches and houses with laurel, box, holly, or ivy, appears also to have been copied by the Christians from their pagan ancestors.

FROST FAIR ON THE THAMES.—In the year 1814 the winter was unusually severe. On the eve of Epiphany a frost commenced, which continued several weeks; and during a great part of that time the Thames was frozen, to the indescribable distress of many industrious classes. A sort of rude fair was held upon the ice, to which the name of Frost Fair was given. And printing presses were set up there, at which was printed a memorial of the duration of the calamitous visitation. The following is a copy:—

"FROST FAIR.

Amidst the arts which on the Thames appear,
To tell the wonders of this icy year,
Printing claims prior place, which at one view
Erects a monument of that and you.

Printed on the River Thames, February 6th, in fifty-fourth year of the reign of King George III., A.D. 1814."

CHRISTMAS IN FRANCE.—In France, as well as in every country upon which Christianity has shed its holy light, the festival of Christmas is a source of great joy to childhood, and the season has its customs hallowed in the lapse of ages. Among them may be noticed the following:—When Christmas draws near, every family in easy circumstances sends for a cask of wine, and lays in a stock of southern fruits, which, as they arrive, may be seen on the quay in large quantities. In the flower market, orange branches with fruit or blossoms in tubs; also all kinds of toys for children, and laurel-trees, hung with various kinds of southern fruits, rose-trees in beautiful pots, and many other tasteful things of the same kind, are set out for sale. The Christmas evening is devoted to universal joy and festivity. All the booths, cellars, *cafés*, and hotels are illuminated, and even the table of the poor chestnut roaster has an additional lamp. The theatre give grand ballets, the gaming houses balls and suppers; and the streets are crowded during the whole night with people and bands of music. That which strangers most admire, and no provincial ever forgets, even when at the greatest distance from his country, is a sort of varied entertainment, at which the whole family is present. The relations, who have been absent from each other, perhaps, during the whole year, are to meet on this evening; those who have been the greatest enemies pardon each other at Christmas; marriages are fixed, married pairs who have been separated are at this time united, the shyest lover becomes eloquent, and the most coy fair one becomes kind; every heart dilates with good-will, love, and tenderness on Christmas evening.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

N. B.—In 1891, the 8th day of November will fall on a Sunday.

N. P.—Dark brown hair. Very neat penmanship, well adapted to copying.

B. R. H.—You failed to inclose the specimen of hair of which mention is made.

F. G.—We cannot spare the space required to give an explanation of the so-called fortune-telling with cards.

E. M.—No proper judgment can be formed of penmanship when a portion of it appears in ink and the balance in pencil.

M. O.—None of the serial stories mentioned can be obtained in book form, but such numbers containing them in print can be furnished at this office at the usual price.

H. B.—Doubtless love at first sight is a tangible something, but at the same time it so seldom happens to prove true, undying affection, that but little dependence can be placed upon it. It seems hardly possible for a man or woman to give their love to an object of which they have such a slight knowledge as can be gained in two or three short weeks.

A. M. P.—1. The potato next after the cereals or grains is the most valuable of all the plants used for human food. It is generally called Irish potato, but it was not known in Ireland until it was carried there from Virginia about three hundred years ago. 2. In Ireland whisky is distilled from potatoes. In northern Europe potato brandy is made from them.

E. A. B.—You can learn drawing and French from books after a fashion; but it would be very tedious work. There are scores of books which profess to "teach French without a master." One of them is just about as good as another. Your best way would be to go to a bookseller's and examine all of them that you can find, and choose the one which you can the most readily understand.

F. A.—Short sight, called myopia, may sometimes be remedied by exercising the eyes in looking at distant objects. While reading, the chin should be kept elevated, so that the head cannot be dropped too low and the eyes brought too near the book, which should each day be placed a little farther from the eyes. If compelled to wear glasses, they should make objects look distinct and bright, but not smaller than natural.

A. C. B.—The author of the national song of the United States, "Hail Columbia," was Joseph Hopkinson, of Philadelphia. It was written in 1798 for the benefit of an actor named Fox, after an air entitled "The President's March," composed in 1789 by a German named Payles. Mr. Hopkinson was a lawyer of eminence, and a member of Congress for two terms. He was subsequently appointed Judge of the United States Court for the Eastern Division of Pennsylvania. He died in 1842.

GROGGER.—The explanation of the expression, "Hobson's choice" is this: Tobias Hobson was the first man in England who let out hackney horses. When a man came for a horse he was led into the stable where there was a great choice, but Hobson obliged him to take the horse which stood nearest to the stable door; so that every customer was alike well served, according to his chance, from whence it became a proverb, when what ought to be your own election was forced upon you, to say "Hobson's choice."

NUMISMATIST.—The oldest coin extant is considered by high authority to be a specimen of the gold stater of the Ionian city of Miletus, now in the British Museum, of about 600 B.C. It has a lion's head on the obverse. But Herodotus says that the Lydians were the first to coin gold, and by some authorities the gold coins found in the ruins of Sardis are believed to antedate the Ionian specimen. The oldest silver coins extant are those of the island of Ægina, bearing a tortoise on the obverse. The Hindoo or Indian coinage is of early origin, but the date is unsettled.

T. C. G.—Wens are commonly situated under the skin of the head. They are simply sacs full of various matters, which look like curd or rice, sometimes like suet, and sometimes like honey. In other instances the contents are mere water, and they have been known to consist of hair or horn. Wens are round, elastic, and movable, and without pain. They grow slowly, but steadily. If they are small, they may be probed, and the contents of the sac squeezed out, but it is believed that the proper and only real remedy for them is their removal by a surgical operation.

E. A. H.—Of the five great oceans the Pacific is the largest. It was first seen by Balboa in 1513, and Magellan was the first to traverse it, in 1525, since which time it has been explored by many navigators. The Atlantic, the second in size, was first navigated by the Carthaginians, and the Northern—about 1000 A.D.—were the first to cross it. The Indian Ocean, as a channel of commerce, would appear to have been the first to find a place in history, inasmuch as the earliest voyage on record beyond the land-locked Mediterranean—that of Solomon's navy—certainly extended further than the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb. In this respect it virtually maintained its superiority during fully 2,000 years, being habitually traversed, in the line of the crow's flight, between Arabia and Hindustan, while coasting voyages alone were known in the Atlantic. For many years the Antarctic Ocean was long considered frozen and impassable for ships, but Commodore Wilkes, an American, and Sir James Ross, in 1841, penetrated into it. For centuries the Arctic Ocean has been the field of hardy exploration by navigators from every portion of the globe.

JERRY.—The longest verse in the Bible is the ninth verse of the eighth chapter of Esther.

ELLA.—At the battle of Pavia in 1525 the matchlock was first used. From that date firearms were improved from time to time, until now they would seem to have reached perfection.

L. M. C.—To purify water in a cistern, use permanganate of potassa. Two ounces thrown into the water will render it perfectly good. The article named can be procured at almost any chemist's.

N. P. L.—To prevent nightmare, in your case, avoid all exciting causes, as protracted reading, abstruse thinking, late suppers, food difficult of digestion, cold feet, and lying when asleep on the back.

V. C. G.—Adonia were feasts anciently held in honour of Venus and Adonia. They lasted two days; the first was spent in tears and lamentations; the second in mirth and feasting. The festival typified the dying and resurrection of nature.

ETHEL.—The gondolas used on the canals of Venice are usually twenty-five to thirty feet long, five feet wide in the middle, and sharp at both ends, which are curved upward, the bow being ornamented with a high, serrated iron plate, something like the letter S in form. Near the middle is a small cabin for the use of passengers.

L. C. D.—You are unnecessarily alarmed. When you wash your hands or feet put a little spirits of ammonia in the water. It will help to relieve you of the trouble of which you complain, which is not uncommon. For excessive perspiration diluted sulphuric acid is recommended, but it would be better for you to consult a respectable surgeon before using it.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

The old home is glad
With music and laughter
Sweet songs are sounding
To roof and to rafters.
Here at the fire
The Yule log is burning,
And here light young hearts
Love's lesson are learning.

Old time-honoured charms
And time-honoured pleasures,
And gay feet tripping
To musical measures,
Out on the stairs
Fair Mary is standing;
One dearest is waiting
A-down on the landing.

Softly she comes,
The dark eyes a-glowing,
The scarlet lips smiling,
The coy dimples showing.
And now he tells her
His chance he's been trying
With chestnuts in the fire,
Now the old year is dying.

"And I—I you know—"
And he falters and stammers.
Ah, two hearts are beating
Love's great golden hammers!
"Let us forget, dear,
The world and the weather,
And our lives, like the nuts,
Burn on, love, together."

C. S.

R. C. S.—Arrack is a strong spirituous liquor distilled from fermented rice and from "toddy," the fermented sap of the cocoanut tree, and also from rice and sugar or rice and treacle fermented with cocoanut juice. The word is used as a generic term for all distilled liquors. The best arrack in the Levant is obtained from the island of Socotra. It is largely imitated in Germany and Holland. There are arracks of grapes, berries, figs, dates, and even of wild flowers, in various parts of the East. Arrack in Arabic means, literally, perspiration.

MIDSHIPMATE.—A sloop is a vessel with one mast, the mainmast of which is attached to a gaff above, to a boom below, and to the mast on its foremost edge. It also carries a jib. A cutter is also a vessel with one mast, and is rigged nearly like a sloop. Its bowsprit runs out straight, and may be run in upon deck, when desired. The differences in the rigging of a sloop and a cutter cannot be described with clearness to non-nautical persons. A "sloop-of-war" is a vessel of war rigged either as a ship, brig, or schooner, and mounting between eighteen and thirty-two guns.

BROKEN-HEARTED LOVES a young man and "cannot give him up," though he has given her up, and has another lady-love. Indeed, he played upon the heart strings of both fair ones at the same time—visiting and corresponding with both. If he is a flirt, as he seems to be, no reliance can be placed on his "actions" or words. They are trained to deceive. If he really cares for you he will return to his allegiance all the sooner if you keep your self-respect and do not let him see that you are "broken-hearted." Don't keep fancying that you are broken-hearted. Don't brood over the fickleness of one young man. Read some nice books—improve yourself. Your handwriting needs improving. Practise writing off something every day—some wise, witty or charming paragraph or verse you have read. Occupation is a capital cement for hearts that are broken; and letting a young man see that you can keep cheerful and pretty without the help of his company will make him value you more than red eyes or sentimental, reproachful letters will do.

GRACE.—You have nothing to do about it. Simply let the matter rest till you hear from the young man, or receive a visit from him. There was no harm in your sending him the address, as your mother knew of it, and approved your doing so.

DOROTHY.—Cloves grow on many islands in the Indian Ocean. They are native to the Molucca or Spice Islands. The clove-tree grows to a height of about forty feet, begins to bear in its seventh year, and continues to be productive for from one hundred to two hundred years.

AURA.—It seems as though the man thought a good deal of you, but is so bashful that he dare not speak to you. You should get some one to introduce you to him, and then it will be your own fault if you do not cure him of his bashfulness, at least so far as you are concerned.

GERTRUDE.—Take time. Your feelings for the young man are undeveloped. Don't try to cultivate them. Perhaps you will find out you did not care particularly for him, after all, and that your parents' choice is better. Romance is a fascinating thing, but judgment, prudence and duty are far better in the long run.

E-THET.—Your pride should not stand against right and affection. You confess you were to blame for the estrangement, that you suffer for it to the extent of affecting your health and spirits. Why not write a frank, modest letter, own your fault, and ask him to forgive it and return to you? Do not marry one man feeling that your heart is another's.

DOLLIE DIPS.—If your father wishes you to stay home with him you should do so by all means, as he is old and in weak health, and doubtless needs a son's aid and sympathy. If you pay no attention to the conduct of your married sisters and their husbands, and devote yourself to your father, you probably will not find your residence at home so very disagreeable after all.

L. E. A. H.—As you were engaged to the young man, and esteemed him highly, it would be best to write once more in an earnest but quiet way, explaining fully the cause of the little epistolary history (if you have not done this before), and asking to know the true reason of the change in him. It is your privilege to demand a candid explanation from him. You write clearly and well. Your letter is also good as to style and expression.

REMY.—Generally speaking, it is wrong for a girl to speak to a young man she does not know, but the circumstances in this case are peculiar. You are both strangers. The young man is of your own station, and a worker like yourself. He is also "quiet and gentlemanly," you say. If, upon inquiry, you find he is of good character, we see no harm in your speaking to him. Your woman's instinct and your good sense will tell you whether his further attentions should be encouraged or not.

B. N. Y.—A young lady may, if she wishes to attend a party, ball or concert, or other place where an escort is required, and is provided with no suitable one, write to her affianced husband, or, if she is not yet engaged, to some friend of the other sex with whom she is sufficiently intimate to venture to take such a liberty, and request him to accompany her. If any expense is to be incurred in thus attending her, she should purchase the admission cards and inclose them in her note to him. This latter should be written in an easy, cordial manner, requesting him to do her the favour of escorting her to the place of amusement on a stated date, provided he has not already a prior engagement. Of course, in the case of an affianced couple, the language used should not be as ceremonious as in other cases.

M. C. A.—The author of the "Mother Goose Melodies" was an excellent and affectionate Boston, U.S., grandmother, who composed the "Melodies" to sing to her baby grandson, over a hundred and sixty years ago. She made the house so ring with her songs that her son-in-law—the baby's father—got exceedingly tired of them, and tried to induce her to stop her singing; but she wouldn't do it. She kept on, and nearly every day she would have a new song. At last her son-in-law, who was a printer, named Thomas Fleet, wrote down the baby songs of his mother-in-law, and printed them, along with all similar ones that he could find, under the title of "Songs for the Nursery; or Mother Goose's Melodies for Children." He used the name "Mother Goose" in derision of his mother-in-law, whom he wished to punish for her refusing to stop singing the songs in his house when he requested her to do so. The book at once became very popular, and has continued to be a favourite with young people and children to the present day. You can get a copy of it at almost any bookseller's.

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†† We cannot undertake to return rejected manuscripts.

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CHRISTMAS NUMBER

WITH No. 1284.—VOL. L.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING DECEMBER 10, 1887.

[PRICE TWOPENCE.]

Christmas Eve at Sea.

I.

The holly bough is gleaming
With dark and prickly sheen,
The mistletoe betraying
Its tender white and green;
The Christmas tree, like fairy,
Holds strange, mysterious gifts;
And though the snow be lying
In deep and treacherous drifts,
Our English hearts are warming
Beneath their festive mirth,
For 'tis the blessed season
When good-will came on earth.

II.

The season stirs our nature
In many mystic ways,
High tides of feeling rising
At thoughts of other days;
But while the bowl is brimming,
And when the feast is spread,
And when dear friends are meeting
And happy tears are shed,
I claim to be remembered
With cheers of three times three
The English hearts that muster
On Christmas Eve at Sea.

III.

Our soldiers and our sailors,
Who hold in England's name
The mightiest realm-domain
Which only she can claim;
The brave adventurers swarming
From out the parent hive,
Who seek with hum of labour
To do, to dare, and strive,
And 'mid their toil to waken
The wilds to English speech,
And glory in the future
Their sons may haply reach!

IV.

And women weak, who bravely—
Some earnest hope at stake—
At call of love or duty
The ocean pathway take;
Oh! sweet the spirit fancy
That all in thought are near!
We feel their unseen presence
Their voices almost hear,
While fondly we remember
With cheers of three times three,
The English hearts who muster
On Christmas Eve at Sea!

D. G. H.

Only a Violet;

OR,
A CHRISTMAS GIFT.

CHAPTER I.

I THINK myself that many of the old fairy tales which delighted our childhood are being enacted still in our midst if only we had our eyes to see them. Their incidents may be a little varied, but the main facts are the same. There is many a Cinderella sighing for a fairy godmother, many a Red Riding Hood threatened by enemies quite as terrible as the wolf. We meet them in our daily life, perhaps, without recognizing their resemblance to the heroines of our favourite childish stories. They seem to us, perhaps, dull, tiresome, and uninteresting, yet their fates might touch our hearts if only we paused to read it.

Molly Lester was one of these modern Cinderellas, only no one chanced to see it.

To most of the good people near Netherton, little Miss Lester was of no interest at all. Even such of them as were charitable enough to remember her existence pitied Mr. Cameron for having the burden of the child's support thrown upon him, and thought it quite a virtue on the part of the flourishing country lawyer that he did not absolutely repudiate the claim of the little waif to share his home, but let her grow up among his own children, share the instructions of their daily governess, and sit Sunday after Sunday in the darkest corner of the old square pew where, for more years than folks could remember, the Cameron family had performed their weekly devotions.

"It was so good of dear Mrs. Cameron," her admiring friends used to declare in chorus, "so Christian-like and generous, to bring up a child with no earthly claim on her as one of her own! She must be a model of wifely obedience, or she would never have submitted to have the girl foisted on her."

As to Molly's claims and Mrs. Cameron's generosity, it is possible there might be two opinions.

One or two unfashionable people, whom Mrs. Cameron had dropped since her husband's fortunes improved, could remember the time, before the lawyer married, when a pretty, bright-faced child made the sunshine of his home; and the young man's devotion to his little sister was the theme of all tongues.

Mary Cameron was only thirteen when her brother brought home his wife, the daughter of Netherton's most flourishing solicitor.

The bride brought a handsome fortune, and in due time, her father took John Cameron into partnership. Children came to make the cottage cheerful; and by the time Mary Cameron was eighteen the family had moved to a large red-brick house, and kept three servants.

Somehow Mary's face lost its brightness as the time wore on. Mrs. Cameron did not hold with girls being idle, and considered her husband had quite enough to do to maintain his own family. Somehow it leaked out that Mary had refused a very promising young farmer in the neighbourhood, and that she was going to London to be a governess.

Netherton missed the pretty face. More than one voice declared it was a shame. Old Dr. Cameron had bequeathed his whole property to his son instead of dividing it, thinking Mary would always have a home with her brother. Mrs. Cameron, assailed with questions, declared the governess plan had been Mary's own doing and then, just as she was expected down for the Christmas holidays, a rumour arose that she was married.

For three long years Mary Cameron's name was never spoken in her mother's house. Then, one winter's night, a weary, broken-hearted woman, carrying a child in her arms, came to Netherton. The lawyer and his wife did not refuse a shelter to the wanderer. She died in their house, and left them her little girl.

Netherton was intensely curious. Why had Mrs. Lester not informed her relations of her ill-health? Where was her husband? Would not his family provide for the little girl? Netherton knew the lawyer too well to seek information from him. His wife was less reserved, and from her it was gleaned that Mary's marriage had been in defiance of her brother's wishes; that her husband was dead, and the luckless child had no one in the world to befriend her except her mother's family.

So Molly Lester, aged two, took up her abode at the red-brick house. There were three cousins older than herself; and, as time went on, half-a-dozen younger, and yet in that cheerful family the child always felt herself an outcast and an alien.

The Cameron children had their mother's nature. They looked on everything done for Molly as so much taken from themselves; they domineered over her and slighted her. What fault they found with the quiet, sad-faced child it would have been hard to say, but there was always a gulf between her and the other children in the flock. Molly was always the odd one.

The lawyer himself was never unkind to her; indeed, there were times when he recalled his love for his bright, young sister, and felt a thrill of pity for her child; but he was a busy, anxious man, away from home all day. The reins of domestic authority were in his wife's hands, and from the very first she hated the alien child. Every farthing spent on Molly (and be sure none were spent needlessly) she grudged. She let the child feel she was a burden, and made the bread of dependence bitter to her.

There never was a time within Molly's memory when she did not know that every one of the other children had a better right to inhabit the comfortable nursery than she had; there never was a time, when she grew old enough to reason, that she did not know by instinct in any quarrel—no matter even if they were in the wrong—the little Camerons would get the better of her.

Molly never had a new frock; she was clothed almost entirely from the left-off wardrobe of the elder girls. She never had any pocket-money unless, indeed, Uncle John chanced to remember her, and seeing her alone (which happened, perhaps, twice a year) presented her with half-a-crown. She never went out with her cousins; Mrs. Cameron declared she was too shabby to take to other people's houses. When visitors came to the lawyer's, for the most part Molly was deputed to keep guard in the nursery, while nurse helped the housemaid wait at table. Save for seeing the little figure at church, and hearing Mrs. Cameron's lament over the expense of poor relations, Netherton in general would almost have forgotten little Molly's existence.

And so unloved, uncared for, the little waif grew up to be eighteen. She had been fairly educated, with a view to teaching the little ones by-and-by; but no other advantages had been given her. No motherly care, no kind affection, no tender counsels had ever been given to

Molly. She had had no "bringing up," unless scoldings can merit the term. Naturally strong and healthy, she had never ailed anything in her life; so there had never been the claim of illness for extra attention. She had lived at the red-brick house for sixteen years, and no one there had any idea of her real name. Want of sympathy had made her live within herself; she never thought of confiding her hopes and fears, her joys or sorrows, to anyone around her. What would they have cared!

It was her eighteenth birthday. It came in winter, a bright, cold December day, when the air was crisp and frosty, the sky clear and blue. No one wished her many happy returns save the cook, a motherly, kindly-natured woman, who pitied the little waif, and had bought her a present—only a bunch of violets, such as in November and December one sees in most greengrocers' shops, for the modest price of a penny or twopence—but to Molly the gift seemed quite magnificent. She had expected nothing, and the kind thought of her was gratifying in itself; besides the violets her birthday brought her another gift—a holiday. It was within a week of Christmas, the boys had not yet returned from school, the three young ladies were visiting their grandmother, and Mrs. Cameron had taken the little ones to spend a long day with a neighbour, who lived some miles out of Netherton.

Molly put her precious flowers into her dress before she went down to dinner. She and her uncle were to take that meal *à la table*, and a great purpose filled the young girl's mind. She knew that Uncle John was her best friend in the family; that, but for his wife's influence, he would have been kinder to her. A great resolution had come to Molly. She meant to tell him how unhappy she was, and to try and persuade him to let her go away.

She had not the least idea where. Molly had no plans of her future. Had she put her yearning into words she would have said she wanted to go somewhere where she would be loved, where they would not always remind her she was one too many.

She had put on her best dress—such a poor, shabby best. It was only a grey merino which had seen good service before it was altered for her; but the gown fitted her slight figure to a nicety, and the broad black belt hid some of its weaknesses. Her collar and cuffs were spotless, and the little knot of violets at her throat gave a finish to the whole.

It was Mrs. Cameron's repeated assertion that her niece was hopelessly plain, and yet Molly's face would have charmed many who had the gift of understanding it. It was too thin, and her cheeks were too pale for health, but the eyes were large and soft as velvet, their colour a dark, lustrous brown, and they had a dumb pleading expression in their depths, which seemed to appeal for kindness; the brow was broad and framed by masses of soft hair, which no efforts would prevent from waving in feathery puffiness, prettier than the result of any curling papers or crimping pins; the back was fastened in one plait and coiled loosely low on her neck; her features were not regular, but they were full of expression. However shabbily Molly was dressed (and Mrs. Cameron did not at all mind her niece being poorly clad) the little waif had a nameless air of refinement about her. Old garments set as gracefully on her as silks and satins on her cousins; but she did not know this herself, poor child, and mourned terribly over her faded gowns and plain straw hats.

Mr. Cameron almost started as she took her place at the table. For a moment his mind went back to the days—more than twenty years ago—when he had been a bachelor, and his pretty little sister sat opposite him, just as Molly did now.

Of course Mary had behaved very badly to him, his wife had quite convinced him of that; but how she had loved him, and how her daughter's face recalled those bygone days!

"How like your mother you grow, child!" he said, abruptly, when the cloth was withdrawn, and he sat down in an arm chair. He never returned to his office before three.

Molly's face flushed.

"I wish you would tell me something about her, Uncle John!"

Mr. Cameron felt in a dilemma.

"There's nothing to tell, Molly. She died when you were about two years old. You can see her name and age in the churchyard."

"But before she died," persisted Molly, "did she live here with you, and were you fond of her?"

"I loved her dearly," said the lawyer, glad of a question he could answer so easily. "We never had a quarrel!"

"Then it was my father you didn't like," said Molly, thoughtfully, "I suppose, Uncle John?"

"I never saw him, Molly!"

Molly opened her eyes.

"I thought he must have vexed you very much!"

"Why?"

Molly hesitated.

"Because you dislike me so! It can't be for anything I have done myself, because it has been so ever since I can remember. Aunt Susan said, one day, she shouldn't be surprised at anything I did that was bad. And all the children hate me!"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Cameron, shortly. "No one dislikes you, and you must have misunderstood your aunt. We are all very fond of you!"

Molly shook her head.

"I think you are sorry for me," she admitted, slowly, "but all the others hate me, and I feel as if I couldn't bear it any longer. Uncle John, won't you please let me go away?"

Mr. Cameron sighed. It seemed to him that history was repeating itself strangely. Time turned back, and he fancied he heard his sister's voice making almost the same request.

"Do let me go away, John? Susan will never like me, and I cannot bear to feel she grudges me my place in your house."

"Molly!"

The girl looked up. She had never before heard her uncle's voice so solemn, never before seen him look so grave.

"Don't be angry, uncle," pleaded the girl. "I know you have been very kind to keep me all these years; but I am grown up now, and I should like to earn my own living. I wouldn't mind how hard I worked if only I was free—if only I didn't feel everyone wished me away."

"Listen, Mary."

She was spellbound. It was the first time anyone had ever called her by her right name—the name that had been her mother's.

"When my sister was dying," went on her uncle, "I swore to her that you should always have a home with us. I had loved her dearly, and it seemed the only thing that would make her die in peace. Surely child, you can't want to urge me to break my promise to your mother?"

"But I am grown up now. I am eighteen!"

"Eighteen! You look a child! Why do you want to leave us? The girls are contented enough at home!"

"But I am not like them. They have friends and relations; they go out and have pleasures. I am only a little waif whom no one cares for!"

He could not deny it; it was so true, but he did his best.

"You know Molly, most of your cousins' treats comes from their grandparents. Now Mr. and Mrs. Marton are no relations to you."

"Haven't I got any relations of my very own?" asked Molly, slowly. "Didn't my father have a family as well as Aunt Susan?"

"I would rather not speak about your father."

"But I want to know," persisted Molly. "And how is it that you never saw him if mother lived with you till she was married?"

Mr. Cameron gave way. She would hear the story some day from unkind tongues; better, perhaps, that she heard it now. Besides, he could keep back one part—the worst part.

"Molly, I would much rather you had not asked me this. Remember, if it pains you, you have brought it on yourself. Your mother and your aunt did not get on together. I can't tell why, for I never understood the rights of it myself. Mary was a very pretty girl, and I used to think the best thing would be for her to marry and have a home of her own; but when the man I expected her to accept proposed, she would have nothing to say to him. Your aunt was vexed; there were high words, and the end of it was your mother went out as a governess."

"Just what I want to do!"

Mr. Cameron sighed.

"She had a very good situation, and gave every satisfaction. We were expecting her down to spend Christmas, and, instead, there came a telegram, saying she was married."

Molly eyes were full of amazement.

"And you didn't know anything about it?"

"Nothing. I went up to London and saw her employers. The lady was most kind, but could give me no explanation. She said your mother left her house in ample time for her to catch the Netherton train. She had no fault to find with her; indeed, it had been a great disappointment when, about a month before, Miss Cameron gave her notice. She could not return after the holidays, as her duties were too heavy. I showed Mrs. Yorke the telegram; she could not help me. My sister had been treated by her almost as a daughter, and introduced to all her friends, but she had never noticed anyone paying her any marked attentions. I had to come home, Molly, as ignorant as I went. We gave out your mother was married and gone abroad with her husband. In a gossiping place like this you are obliged to tell people something just to stop their tongues. Our friends took up the idea we disliked the match, and had quarrelled with Mary in consequence, so that we were spared many questions."

"And didn't she write to you?"

"I never had a line from her. Three years after she came home. I can't bear to think of it even now. If ever a woman's heart was broken it was your mother's, Molly!"

"But my father?" pleaded Molly.

"That is the strangest part of it. Your mother was devoted to him; not one word against him would she hear. He had been, she declared, the best and kindest of husbands; she had never regretted her marriage even when poverty stared them in the face. I think they had a bitter fight with poverty. You were but a baby when things looked so bad. Your father declared he must go to a friend's house and try to borrow some money. He started, and from that hour your mother never saw him or heard of him again."

Molly started.

"He must have been killed!"

"Mary declared he was very ill when he left her, and that death must have overtaken him," pursued the lawyer. "For months she could not bear to quit the lodgings where he left her. She slaved almost night and day to pay the rent and provide food for both of you. It was only when her husband had been gone a whole year, and she felt her own strength failing, that she came here. She could not die and leave you alone in the world! She brought you to me, and, as I

told you, exacted a solemn promise from me that I would give you a home."

Molly looked up with dewy eyes.

"Uncle John! You believe my father died, don't you?"

Mr. Cameron had no fixed belief on the subject. He knew his wife's version, that James Lester had tired of poverty and his penniless wife, and had quietly gone back to his own relations, hoping, as Mary knew nothing of their whereabouts, her existence would never be revealed to them. Mrs. Cameron wanted so far as to say Lester was most likely an assumed name, and the marriage no real marriage at all.

John Cameron was a lawyer, and knew something of the baseness of human nature. There were men in the world, he admitted, wicked enough to play the part his wife ascribed to Molly's father; but, on the other hand, Mary's perfect trust in her husband had half infected him, so he had been content to dismiss the subject from his thoughts, and record no judgment for or against James Lester; but now, with the man's daughter looking into his face, it was hard to evade a direct reply.

"Molly, I honestly think the poor fellow died on his way to his friend; but you must remember we have no proof. He might have gone to Australia to seek his fortune in the gold districts, things were so desperate with him. Supposing his friend refused assistance he may have emigrated just to spare himself the pain of going back to tell your mother of his failure."

Mr. Cameron skilfully suppressed the blackest doubt of all. He hoped Molly might never hear it.

"And that is why Aunt Susan cannot love me!" said Molly, thoughtfully. "Uncle John, please let me go away?"

"I'll think about it, Molly!" was the quiet reply, "but I don't want to decide anything in a hurry."

A hasty kiss, and he was gone.

Molly went upstairs and put on her walking things. It was only three. It would be light for another hour and a-half, and she wanted to go out. It almost seemed as if the house would stifle her. She wanted to be alone, to think over the wonderful things she had heard, and to try to understand them.

Netherton was rather a straggling town, and the red brick-house was quite on the outskirts. Only a little way beyond the Camerons the free open country began, and Molly's favourite walk was through a wood, the property of Sir Lewis Allonby, one of the leading magistrates of Netherton, but who gave the bustling place but little of his society.

Allonby Towers was the show-place of Netherton. It was seven miles by road, but barely three if you took the pathway through the woods.

Sir Lewis was a young man, barely thirty, and only newly come to his honours. It was a favourite dream with Mrs. Cameron that he should come home and marry one of her girls. As yet, however, the dream seemed very far off fulfilment. Sir Lewis showed no signs of coming to Highshire, and if he came there were many damsels of higher birth and greater attractions than the lawyer's daughters.

Molly never troubled herself about the Baronet. She was not admitted to those cosy consultations between Mrs. Cameron and her girls. She never heard any local news. She loved the Allonby woods, because they were such a famous place for a lonely ramble. She knew that about two years before the old man who owned them died, and Sir Lewis succeeded him; but beyond that bare fact she heard nothing. Sir Lewis could not close the woods to the public; there had been a right-of-way through them for years, so Molly cared very little what he did or omitted.

It was a beautiful afternoon, so clear and frosty. Molly was warmly wrapped up, and enjoyed her freedom to the utmost. After all, there were pleasures Aunt Susan could not deprive her of. There alone, in the beautiful country, with the fresh air fanning her cheeks, Molly forgot her troubles, forgot she was only a little Cinderella whom no one wanted, and looked forward hopefully to the future, though she hardly knew what she expected of it.

"The girls will marry some day," thought Molly. "Perhaps when she has no daughters of her own at home Aunt Susan may like me just a little. Besides, uncle said he would see about my going away, so perhaps he means to let me, after all."

She was leaning against a tree, resting just a little from her walk; her face was turned homewards. Very soon she would have to go back to the red-brick house and the six o'clock tea of thick bread-and-butter and milk-and-water, over which she presided in the nursery, while Mr. and Mrs. Cameron, with their elder olive branches, enjoyed a very different repast in comfort downstairs, though it went by the same name.

A pretty picture she made, that slender, girlish figure, leaning against the grim old tree. A stranger, approaching slowly, thought he had never seen a prettier attitude. Who was she, this beautiful child, with her wistful face and sweet, houri-eyes? The faint perfume of violets reached him, and stooping down he picked up a tiny bunch lying on the ground. He felt certain they belonged to the girl who had so stirred his fancy, and was grateful to them for giving him the chance of speaking to her.

"I think you must have dropped these!"

Molly took them with a word of thanks.

Keith Durant wondered what he could say to detain her in conversation. He wanted another glance from those wistful eyes, another sound of that dear, musical voice.

"Could you tell me the nearest way to Netherton?" he asked, courteously.

"Oh, yes! You have only to go through the wood, and you will be at the entrance to the town."

"Is it very far?"

"Oh, no; not more than half-an-hour's walk."

"I want to go to Mr. Cameron's, I am quite a stranger in Netherton."

Never a girl more innocent of motive, more simple-hearted of intention, than Molly. The stranger wanted to go to her uncle's, and she was walking home. It would have seemed to her unnatural not to offer her guidance.

"We live close to the woods. I am going home now."

"Then you are Miss Cameron?"

She shook her head.

"No; but I have lived with the Camerons all my life."

He changed the subject of her identity with rare tact.

"I think Netherton seems a nice place."

"Some of the walks are beautiful; these woods in summer time are quite a picture."

Keith thought they had been quite a picture that afternoon, but he did not say so. She was so child-like and unaffected he could not offer her a compliment.

"I have been staying at Shelverton," he informed her, "and my friend Allonby asked me to come over here and prepare his people for his arrival. He will be here to-morrow, I expect, and I am very glad, for the Towers is awfully dull for a lonely man."

"Is Sir Lewis going to live here?" inquired Molly, quickly; "I hope not!"

"I think he has only come over from the Continent for Christmas. He will be down with quite a large party to-morrow. We are great friends, and as I was his 'fag' at school I suppose he thinks he knows my domestic capabilities; but I really think the old house-keeper would have managed without my assistance. As it is, she consults me so continually that I am quite glad to get out to avoid her."

"Sir Lewis must be a very lazy man!" said Molly, quietly, "to leave you all the trouble."

"Oh, he's one of the best of fellows, and we are sworn friends; besides, he's never seen Mrs. Breen. I daresay he had no idea of her talking powers."

"She does talk a great deal."

"You know her, then?"

"A very long time ago her daughter was our nurse, and Mrs. Breen used to come and see us."

They had left the woods behind them now, and were fast nearing the red brick house.

"You told me just now you were not Miss Cameron. Won't you tell me by what name I may remember you?"

"I am Mary Lester. Mr. Cameron is my uncle."

"And you live with him?"

"I have never been away from Netherton since I can remember."

"Do you mean never away at all, or only that you have always lived here?"

Molly smiled.

"I mean that I have never been away for a single day. I know nothing of any other place more than five miles from Netherton."

"How you will enjoy sight-seeing when the time comes for it! I suppose you have not left school yet?"

"I have never been to school. We used to have a governess, but she went when I was seventeen; and now I teach the children."

"Do you know, when I first saw you I took you for a child yourself?"

"Aunt Susan always says I look a baby," said Molly, regretfully; "but I can't help it. I used to be tall as a child, but I have not grown an inch since I was fourteen!"

"Some people like babies," said Keith Durant, with a strange smile. "I do. Don't wish to look older than you are, Miss Lester; time ages us all quite enough."

"You speak as if you felt as old as Methuselah," said Molly, simply.

"I am twenty-six. I daresay it sounds venerable to you, but it isn't very old, really. My grandfather always speaks of me as 'that boy.'"

"I wish I had a grandfather."

"And haven't you?"

"I have no relations excepting Uncle John."

"But Mr. Cameron has a family?"

"He has nine children, but they don't seem real relations. I don't think cousins are very near to one."

"No!" said Mr. Durant, with peculiar emphasis. "In my opinion they are very far off. If there is a relationship I detect it is consinship."

They were at the house now. The office stood at one side; but Molly knew her uncle would have returned, so she made no attempt to prevent her companion from following her up the long flight of steps.

Instead of opening the door by turning the handle, in her usual manner, she rang the bell. This brought a servant, to whose care she confided the visitor, then she sped away upstairs.

"Miss Lester hasn't come home yet, Miss Lester," said the nurse, pleasantly (all the servants had a regard for the little wail, whose low, sweet voice was so different from the imperious commands of

her cousins). "The master thinks she's missed the train, so he has ordered tea for you and him at six, and then he's going down to the station to meet her."

It was a treat to Molly to escape the nursery meal, which was usually a scene of strife, since Mr. Cameron's "sweet lambs" always set their cousin's authority at defiance; but it was a surprise to her when Mr. Cameron came into the dining-room, followed by her late escort, whom he introduced to her as Mr. Durant.

Molly felt she must be quite and entirely grown up since she was allowed to preside at the table and entertain a visitor! She spoke very little, but busied herself with her teapot, while the gentlemen conversed. They seemed to take a mutual fancy to each other.

Molly gathered that Mr. Durant's only errand had been to explain to her uncle Sir Lewis had delayed writing about some business matters because he hoped so soon to be in Highshire.

"I wish you could persuade your friend to settle down here," remarked Mr. Cameron. "The Allonby estate is the largest in the neighbourhood, and his influence would be extensive."

"Lewis is not in the least ambitious. His mother wants him to marry and go into Parliament, but he seems averse to either action."

"The Allonbys have always represented Netherton," said Mr. Cameron. "I should think he would meet with no opposition, if he came forward at the next election. As to the other matter, I fancy Mrs. Allonby will find many young ladies quite willing to assist her wishes."

"You think twenty thousand a year would be an inducement?" remarked Keith. "Perhaps you are right. I know this is a terribly mercenary age. I know I often feel thankful I am a poor man, and that I run no risk of being married for money!"

Mr. Cameron laughed.

"There are degrees of poverty, Mr. Durant."

"Oh! I am a hopeless detrimental!" said Keith, lightly. "I don't think my whole means would make up four hundred a-year, and I never had any profession."

"That's a pity!"

"I see it now. Take warning by me, Mr. Cameron, and don't let your boys choose for themselves."

"They must work," replied the lawyer "the whole set of them. I shall have quite enough to do to provide for their sisters. Nine children make an expensive family, Mr. Durant!"

"But it must be cheerful to be one of a number?" objected Keith. "In our family things have gone very differently. My grandfather had half-a-dozen sons and daughters, but he could only boast two grandchildren!"

They rose from tea. Mr. Cameron said he would put his guest in the right way for his long walk homewards before going to the station to meet his wife.

Before they started he had some orders to give. For a moment Molly and Mr. Durant found themselves alone.

"You said your name was Mary?" he said, half-reproachfully.

"I was christened so; but everyone calls me Molly."

"It just suits you. I shall always think of you as Miss Molly. I wish I might ask you something?"

"What is it?"

He smiled, and pointed to the violets which from their place in her dress still gave forth a sweet perfume.

"Give me just one, in memory of our meeting!"

"But there must be heaps of violets at Allonby?"

"But not like these. Miss Molly, give me just one violet in token that we are to be friends!"

And with a smile and a blush she laid one little flower in his hand, just as Mr. Cameron was heard returning.

Keith never saw sweet violets again without thinking of Miss Molly in the sad time when clouds had rolled over his sky and shattered his bright dreams. He could never bear the fragrant perfume of the little purpled flowers. It seemed to give him a bitter pang—a strange longing for what might have been.

The present scene, whatever it might be, fled from him, and he was back once more in Allonby Woods beside a slight, grey-robed figure, with a posy of violets at her throat.

"Good-bye!" he said, eagerly, as he put the trophy in his pocket.

"Good-bye, Miss Molly! We shall meet again!"

Which Molly thought exceedingly doubtful, as Mrs. Cameron was not likely to be from home the next time Mr. Durant called; and she always took good care her husband's niece never shared the pleasure of any visitor's society. So Molly gave a little sigh as her new friend departed, and had but little expectation of seeing him again.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. CAMERON was very angry when she returned home and discovered what had gone on in her absence. Of course Miss Molly received a sharp rebuke; but when the worthy matron retired for the night her husband came in for his full share of her righteous displeasure.

"I really wonder at you, John! How you can be so lost to all proper feeling surprises me!"

"My dear Susan, I should like to know what I have done?" returned the usually obedient husband, who, perhaps from the recollection of that long talk with Molly, did not feel quite so submissive as usual.

"You have brought forward that girl in a most unbecoming fashion! Why, even my own daughters I should not have cared to allow play hostess to a stranger in my absence! And Molly, with her miserable antecedents, should be kept rigidly in the background!"

She had gone too far. The worm turned, or, in other words, the master of the house asserted himself at last.

"I grant that your daughters are so given to flirting with anyone who will join them in that amusement that it might have been wiser to allow either of them to meet a stranger without your presence!" returned Mr. Cameron, sarcastically. "But my niece is quite a different matter. She entertained Mr. Durant very prettily, and I was quite pleased with her manners!"

"Of course!" said the wife, bitterly. "Her mother turned your heart against me years ago! It is only natural the girl should supplant my children!"

"Come, Susan, don't talk nonsense! If our girls had been at home, and I had brought Molly forward, and left them in the cold, you might have had a right to complain; but you know the child was the only one of the family at hand!"

"It is the worst possible taste to introduce her to strangers," grumbled Mrs. Cameron.

"And it is positive cruelty to keep her shut up as though she were a baby. Susan, I have been thinking seriously of the matter lately, and now I am decided. Molly is eighteen, and she must 'come out' like other girls!"

"My own daughters are quite enough for me to chaperone. I certainly shall not take four girls about with me. Besides, no one ever invites Molly!"

"I don't often have a voice in domestic matters, Susan, but this time I have made up my mind. Molly comes out this Christmas!"

"I think you are a monster!"

"What difference can it make to you?" he retorted. "Of course I'll give you some money to dress her with; that's my affair."

"We shall be asked nowhere. No one will invite my sweet girls if it involves having her."

"Why not?"

"John, you know perfectly well the girl's wretched antecedents!"

"I know nothing of the sort, Susan. My sister was as pure and true-hearted a woman as ever breathed; and at one time a great favourite in Netherton. I believe myself people will gladly welcome Mary's daughter."

"And what about her father?"

"Her father was not rich, and he left them in abject poverty; but the same is true of many other men, Susan, whose children are received."

"Well, I wash my hands of it," replied his wife. "When she has disgraced us by marrying the first ne'er-do-well who asks her—like her mother—perhaps you'll repent it."

Mr. Cameron did not entirely trust his wife. He changed his mind about giving her the money for Molly's outfit, and told her to choose whatever was needful at Mason's (the largest linen-draper's in the town), and send the bill in to him.

Mrs. Cameron went about with the air of a suffering martyr; the three girls did the same. The unfortunate lawyer bid fair to pay dearly—domestically—for his bold step in his niece's favour.

And the real reason for the discontent of his womenkind never dawned on him. His three daughters, aged twenty, twenty-two, and twenty-four, had all been "in society," as Netherton put it, for ages (even Maude had been out three years). They were showy, rattling sort of girls, and always commanded partners at a dance or cavaliers at a picnic. But no eligible suitor had ever come forward to propose for one of them. Their little world already began to call Bertha *passée* and her sisters full-blown. Would it not show up their true age. Would it not reveal that they were no longer young girls, but women grown, to bring forward at their side such a childish creature as Molly. Besides, her style was so different.

Molly, even in her shabby clothes, had the air of some stray princess, who had been banished from court for a brief space; but the three Miss Camerons were unmistakably middle-class. Their father's gentle blood showed but little; they took after their mother's family, who sprang from nothing.

It was two days after Mr. Cameron's decision when Mr. Durant called again at the red-brick house, this time accompanied by his friend, Sir Lewis Allonby.

They asked for the solicitor's wife, and were soon shown into her presence. The three girls were unfortunately out; but when the gentlemen revealed their errand Mrs. Cameron resolved to prolong the interview indefinitely, so as to give her dear children a chance of returning.

"I hope you will pardon our intrusion," said Sir Lewis, "but my mother thinks of giving a large ball on New Year's night; and, as she is such a stranger in the neighbourhood, she thought you might be kind enough to help her by telling me the names of our neighbours who would be likely to come?"

Mrs. Cameron was delighted. She felt a sort of proprietary interest in the whole affair.

"Your own personal friends first, of course, Sir Lewis; and then comes the question—is it to be select or popular?"

"I have no personal friends in the county except Mr. Durant, here present, and some guests at the Towers. I fancy it would be a good limit if we sent invitations only to those who would be likely to call on my mother!"

"My dear Sir Lewis, that would include the whole population, down to the tradespeople!"

"All right," said the Baronet, cheerfully; "the more the merrier. I can have select parties later on; but this ball I want to be a kind of omnium gatherum affair, which will introduce me to the neighbourhood generally."

Mrs. Cameron rang for paper and pencil. It was an intense annoyance to her that the housemaid, being out, Molly answered the bell. There was no help for it. Mr. Durant was eagerly shaking hands with his little friend; her aunt had no excuse, and was forced to introduce her to Sir Lewis.

"I want a paper and pencil, Mary," she said, coldly; "you will find both in the dining-room. Send Sarah with them."

"I will go and help to look for them," insisted Keith, and before a word could be said in opposition he and Molly had left the room.

Sir Lewis and Mrs. Cameron were so different in mind and feeling. It was passing strange both should experience the same sentiments, when the door closed on the young pair. Still, their regret sprang from widely opposite causes. The practical mother hated every chance which gave Molly favours instead of her girls, while Sir Lewis thought it hard he was not in Keith's place, for those sweet brown eyes had impressed him strongly.

"Durant will be a valuable auxiliary to us in the ball," he said to Mrs. Cameron. "I never saw a fellow so good at planning things. I always tell him he ought to be secretary to some colonial magnate and arrange all the festivities. He'd be in his element most thoroughly!"

Mrs. Cameron smiled graciously.

"I suppose he is an old friend. I can see you are warmly attached to him!"

"Well, it began fourteen years ago, when he was my fag at Eton. We have never had a difference, but been sworn allies ever since."

"Is Mr. Durant English? It is such a foreign-sounding name!"

"I believe his father's family came of French extraction, but his mother, Lady Maude, was one of Lord Ogilvie's daughters, and Keith has always seemed more of a Tempest than a Durant."

Mrs. Cameron felt suddenly she had not been nearly gracious enough to Mr. Durant. She had treated him somewhat as a humble friend of Sir Lewis, and lo! he stood revealed to her as an earl's grandson!

The good matron's father had begun life as an errand boy at five shillings a week. Only his own intense application and keen intellect raised him to the position of first lawyer in Netherton. Her mother's origin was even lower down in the social scale, so that it is hardly wonderful Mrs. Cameron herself had an intense veneration for a title.

Meanwhile the paper and pencil seemed long in finding. Keith really had seized the letter and put it in his pocket while Molly was taking a sheet of paper from her aunt's blotting-book, so that it was not strange she sought in vain for the pencil she had seen that morning.

"Miss Lester!" said Mr. Durant, suddenly, "are you fond of dancing?"

Molly started.

"I love it dearly; but I have never danced at all, excepting at children's parties; where there was no one to help the stupid ones."

"Mrs. Allonby is going to give a large ball on New Year's Day, and I want you to promise me the first dance?"

"I shall not be there."

"I think you will. If we meet there will you promise me the first dance?"

"If you wish it; but—"

"We won't have any buts. Do you know I have your violet safe?"

"It must have faded!"

He looked at her a little keenly, but he saw she meant just what she said. He brought the piece of pencil reluctantly from his pocket, and gave it her as though he had only just found it.

"I suppose we must go back to the drawing-room now! Remember, Miss Molly, you are coming to the ball, and you have promised me the first dance."

The three Miss Camerons returned, and were making talk for the Baronet. Sir Lewis was too perfectly well bred to let any one guess how they bored him, so their mother thought all was going on well, and felt so elated in consequence that she made no objection when Sir Lewis said, as he took leave,—

"Then I may tell my mother she can rely on your not failing her, Mrs. Cameron? We may expect you and your four young ladies for certain on the first."

"Of course you won't take Molly, mother?" said Alice, when the visitors were out of sight and hearing. "It would be absurd!"

"You know she has nothing fit to wear," chimed in Bertha, "and I don't believe she can dance a bit!"

"And we can't go five in a carriage," objected Maude. "All our dresses will be crushed!"

Molly was not there, though, I fear, no consideration for her feelings would have checked these amiable remarks even if she had been present.

"It's no use talking, girls. I shouldn't take the child if I could help it, depend upon it, but your father seems to have gone crazy about her, and declared she should come out this winter, whether I like it or not. Of course, if he insists on her going to the Towers I can't help it."

"Tell him she has nothing to wear, and it will make another carriage indispensable."

But Mr. Cameron replied, to all his wife's arguments, he meant Molly to go, as he should attend the ball himself. The second carriage would be required in any case, and he would buy the child a ball dress.

"Much beauty there'll be about it if papa chooses it," said Maude, sarcastically. "Why, he doesn't know tarlatan from linsey!"

"He never offered to choose *your* clothes," said Mrs. Cameron, jealously. "I declare he seems quite daft about the girl, and she's nothing to look at either—nothing but a mass of brown hair and a pair of eyes too big for her face!"

But Mr. Cameron did not trust to his own taste, though his knowledge of dress was a little more extended than his daughter fancied. There was a humble relation of his wife's quite lost sight of by her since the family rose in the world, who was earning an honest living as head of Messrs. Mason's dressmaking department. She had once been a schoolfellow of Mary Cameron's, and the lawyer had always had a cheerful greeting for her when they met, so that they were quite friendly enough for him to ask her a favour. He called on her at the shop, and told her "he wanted a dress fit for a young lady to wear at her first party."

"It's for poor Mary's child, you know, Laura. I'll tell her to send round one of her old frocks that you may know the size. I don't want the child to see the dress till it's finished. I'm not a rich man, and I've nine children, so don't make it anything elaborate, but as pretty a toilet as you can manage, and perhaps you'd put in gloves and fal-lals of that sort. She's coming out at the Allonby ball on New Year's night, and I don't want her to look as though she'd stepped out of Noah's Ark. My wife's enough to do with rigging out her own girls, so I said I'd see to Molly."

Miss Stone was well aware of that, as her cousin (who ignored the relationship and treated her most condescendingly) had paid a visit to the show-room that very morning, and given an extensive order. In her way of business, of course, Miss Stone would have something to do with the three toilets of the Misses Cameron, but she would not throw her whole soul into the cause, as she was prepared to do in the matter of Molly's first ball dress.

As for Molly, she was in a happy dream. She was to go to the ball and have a new frock for it! She was to see Allonby Towers, long her greatest ambition, and be introduced to the sweet-faced lady she had seen at church on Christmas morning, who seemed to the girl's imagination fairer and more charming than any of the guests who accompanied her. And last, but in no ways least, she would meet Keith Durant, and dance with him!

Can you wonder that with such a brilliant prospect in the future Molly put up with daily slights and unkindness, seeming hardly to know of their existence? She felt like Cinderella in the good old tale, only that twelve o'clock would have no fatal significance for her since Mrs. Cameron meant to stay till the very end of the ball.

Christmas passed uneventfully, excepting it was very strange how often Sir Lewis needed to consult Mrs. Cameron. He and his faithful friend came over quite four times in the week between Christmas and the ball. You would have thought Mrs. Allonby had never given an entertainment in her life, and the lawyer's wife had done nothing else, so often was her opinion solicited on divers points with the most delightful eagerness and deference.

The evening came at last. Perhaps Laura Stone thought the whole family would be invisible, engaged in their own rooms, and she might be a real help to Molly without encountering any of her relations; for about seven o'clock, when the shop was closed, she just stepped round, and asked the servant if she could see Miss Lester.

Molly was only too delighted for the chance of thanking her for making her such a lovely dress, and did the honours of her chilly attic with grateful pride.

The dress was, indeed, a picture, and yet it was far less costly than the toilets of Molly's cousins. Laura Stone possessed exquisite taste, and Molly's attire had been a labour of love.

It was pure white, and looked like tulle; only it was not tulle, but some kindred material frosted over as though it had been touched by the crystal dew-drops. It was very long, for everyone wore trains at that time, and was looped up on one side to reveal a white silk petticoat. It was square in front, to show the girlish throat, while the sleeves ended at the elbow, and left bare the round, white arms.

"You want just a touch of colour," said Miss Stone, doubtfully. "I wish I'd put a knot of crimson ribbons!"

A knock at the door, and enter cook with a cardboard box.

"I would bring it up myself, Miss Molly. I made up my mind no one else should get it, whatever it was."

Molly was speechless with delight, as from its wrappings she took a bouquet composed entirely of violets and snowdrops, while, as though divining Miss Stone's dilemma, the box was perfectly lined with violets arranged in tiny bundles.

Molly's cheeks burnt as she caught sight of a slip of paper. While her kindly assistant was fastening knots of violets on her dress she managed to read the few words traced in pencil.—

"In exchange for another violet we know of."

"She looks a picture!" cried cook, when Miss Stone, having put the finishing touch to her handiwork, was departing rather hurriedly, lest she should come across her cousin Susan.

The old maid's eyes filled.

"She has her mother's face," she said, sadly. "Heaven grant she may be happier!"

"It won't be Missie's fault if she is," said cook, bluntly. "I never saw people persecute anyone as she and the young ladies do Miss Molly! It makes me mad—it does!"

But Molly had forgotten all sad thoughts. To look at her one might have imagined she had never known a sorrow, she seemed so bright and lovely.

Cinderella's godmother had done her work right thoroughly. No attire could have been more simple and less costly, and yet it was the most becoming and suitable ball-dress for a young girl that could possibly have been devised.

Mrs. Cameron looked askance at the violets, but cook had kept the secret, and the matron put them down to her husband's extravagance. A pretty penny he must have spent on that girl's get-up. If ever poor woman had a right to wish her husband had no relatives, it was surely she—Susan Cameron.

The party divided for the drive. Mrs. Cameron and her two elder girls had the first carriage, her husband followed, with his niece and Maude.

John Cameron had married for ambition and worldly motives, because Susan's fortune and her father's influence would advance him professionally.

As he gazed from Maude's face to her cousin's, perhaps he understood his mistake. Molly looked a little lady, a stray princess, it might be, going to some entertainment given in her honour. Maude, in pink satin and fawn-coloured lace, had a hopelessly, over-dressed air. She was pretty, but it was in a common style. No one could have taken her for a damsel of high degree.

"Your first ball," she said slightly to her cousin. "Of course you don't expect any partners—no one knows you?"

Molly sighed.

"It will be pleasant to see everyone enjoying themselves, even if I don't often dance, and I want to see the conservatory at the Towers. Perhaps, if no one asks me to dance, you will take me there, Uncle John?"

"I don't think it will be as bad as that, Molly," said John Cameron, kindly. "I know one or two young fellows who are fond of dancing."

Maude opened her eyes.

"You never trouble yourself to find us partners," she said, in an injured tone.

"My dear, I never saw you in want of them."

And then there was no time for more. The fly had stopped before the porticoed entrance, and they were walking up the terrace steps.

The lawyer looked in vain for his wife, but a familiar voice interposed.

"Mrs. Cameron and her daughters arrived a few minutes ago. If you will take Miss Maude, I will show you the way to the ballroom!"

It was Keith Durant. He had drawn Molly's hand through his arm, and was walking forward with her. There was nothing for it, Maude had to follow with her father.

At the entrance to the ballroom stood a lady in soft, grey satin. She was talking to Sir Lewis Allonby, on whose arm she leaned.

"Lewis, who is that beautiful child? See, coming towards us with Keith?"

"It is Miss Lester, mother."

Mrs. Allonby was accounted haughty and exclusive; but, instead of a formal bow when Molly passed, she took the little hand in hers.

"I am very glad to see you, Miss Lester. I hear this is your first ball. I hope it will be a pleasant one!"

Molly smiled, and the smile made a captive of Mrs. Allonby even more than the low, sweet words of thanks.

"Lewis," said his mother, as Keith and his companion passed on, "I am quite sure I have seen that little girl before."

Sir Lewis shook his head.

"I think you must be mistaken, mother. She has never been out of Netherton since she was a baby."

"Well, her smile is perfectly familiar to me. She is dancing with Keith. They make a charming couple!"

But Sir Lewis did not seem to find the sight quite such a pleasant one as his mother. He was conscious of but one wish, as he saw Molly veering round in Keith's arms in the mazes of the waltz—a consuming desire to be in her partner's place—and, alas! he was in his own house, and as host had at least half a score of "duty dances" with matrons and neighbour demiselles before he could venture to gratify his own longings, and inscribe his name on Molly's programme.

CHAPTER III.

THE ball was a great success—that was the general verdict. Of course there were a few dissenting voices, but the majority were of opinion the whole affair had gone off famously.

Molly Lester, leaning back in her corner of the carriage, felt as if she had had a taste of Paradise. She had danced every dance, and Sir Lewis himself had shown her the conservatory, while gentle Mrs. Allonby had found time to talk to her for a few minutes, and to say she hoped some day Mrs. Cameron would spare her niece to spend a long afternoon at the Towers.

The other girls were not quite so satisfied. True, Sir Lewis had danced with each one, but the rest of the time they had had to be

content with their old Netherton acquaintances, and had not penetrated into the more aristocratic circle formed by the guests staying at the Towers and a few country people. It had been a very pleasant ball, but their detested little cousin had been preferred before them, and not one of the three had the sense to perceive that Molly's good fortune was not her own fault.

The next day Mr. Cameron was quite glad to escape to his office, for the domestic atmosphere was very stormy. The schoolboys kept the house in an uproar, and made the smaller children utterly unmanageable. The three young ladies had headaches, and breakfasted in bed, poor little Molly being kept flying from one room to another with tea and toast and other light refreshments suited to such interesting invalids.

By the afternoon they got up and dressed, and went into the drawing-room to discuss the ball with their mother, and hear her comments.

Mrs. Cameron was not a lady, but she had a large amount of shrewdness, and her judgment on any matter where her prejudices were not concerned was very clever. Unfortunately she allowed her personal feelings to blind her a great deal; and so, when the girls demanded if it had not been a delightful ball, and whether she did not think Sir Lewis charming, she responded in the affirmative, and also said she thought the Baronet had been most attentive to Alice, and, really, she shouldn't be surprised if next New Year's day found her second daughter ruling at the Towers as Lady Allonby.

What she founded her bright visions on it would have been hard to say.

Alice was the least common of the three sisters, and sang well, in rather a florid style. She also possessed a grain of good taste, which, as she inclined to plumpness, made her dresses always in black or dark colours. She certainly had looked her best last night in Spanish lace, with trimmings of pale blue, and Sir Lewis had looked a little less *distracted* in dancing with her than with her sisters; still, it was indeed magnifying matters to dream that he had paid her any marked attention.

"Bertha is the eldest," went on Mrs. Cameron, who was given to plain speaking, "but Sir Lewis is a trifle too grave for her. Depend upon it, girls, it's Alice as'll be Lady Allonby, and then she'll know how to provide good husbands for her sisters."

Bertha laughed good-naturedly.

"Alice is welcome for me," she said, frankly. "I'll confess I liked dancing with Sir Lewis, just for the honour of the thing, but my quadrille with him was awfully prosy—I did not enjoy it one scrap. And if ten minutes of his society seems so tedious I must say I shouldn't like a lifetime!"

"You didn't talk to him about the right things," suggested her mother. "Never mind, it's just as well you don't all fancy him; he can't marry two wives!"

"Mamma," began Maude, the spiteful one of the family, "did you ever see anything so disgraceful as Molly's conduct last night? She flirted outrageously!"

"That girl is the plague of my life," declared Mrs. Cameron. "I do wish I could get rid of her!"

"She looked quite pretty last night," admitted Alice, "and I think some of her partners thought so."

Mrs. Cameron drew herself up, with quite an air.

"I don't think any of the gentlemen we met last night would care to marry Mary Lester," she replied scornfully.

"Mr. Durant was very attentive to her."

"Mr. Durant! An Earl's grandson! Impossible!"

"He may be an Earl's grandson," retorted Maude; "but he has no money. He told father he had only four hundred a-year of his own, and no profession. I don't think the fact of his having a rich and noble grandfather makes him eligible. He will have to look out for an heiress. In the meantime he likes to play with simpletons like Molly."

The days passed on after that ball till the new year was a fortnight old. The Camerons had all been to call on Mrs. Allonby, but she was out. It was felt a very great honour that she had returned their visit after a very short interval, and begged Mrs. Cameron to let two of the girls come and stay with her at the Towers.

"Most of my young friends have left us, but I will do my best to make your girls happy if you will spare Miss Alice and her cousin to us."

"Then Sir Lewis is serious, and means to propose to Alice," decided Mrs. Cameron in her own mind; "but what on earth do they want with Molly?" Aloud. "I am sure, my lady, my Alice will be delighted; but Molly is nothing but a schoolgirl. I shouldn't think of troubling you with her."

"But I wish it specially," pleaded Mrs. Allonby. "Do you know, Miss Lester's face reminds me of a very dear friend, and she seems just the sort of girl to be happy at home with an old lady, while her cousin rides and skates!"

These tactics succeeded. Mrs. Cameron caught up the idea that Molly was to be the companion of her hostess, while Alice enjoyed the Baronet's attentions. Molly was quite welcome to absorb Mrs. Allonby's favours, so long as she did not engross her son. The lawyer's wife knew perfectly that the widow's fortune was very slender. Apart from her son she could not afford any very grand establishment. Alice would not care for a mother-in-law permanently located at the Towers, so if Mrs. Allonby took a fancy to Molly it might be of real service to her mother by-and-by.

"I don't mind," returned Alice, when her sister pitied her for having Molly as a companion. "If she takes Mrs. Allonby off our hands she will be a service. She is just the sort of girl to be happy with an old lady!"

So the two girls left the red-brick house—the lawyer having first given Laura Stone a commission on Molly's account—and Mrs. Allonby received them with winning hospitality. She knew she was acting strangely, that the county would marvel at her asking her lawyer's family instead of her nobler neighbours; but she was used to please herself without caring for public opinion. She wanted Molly, and she had seen at once Molly could not be had without a cousin. Alice seemed the least objectionable of the three sisters—hence the selection.

"You know, Lewis," she said to her son, the morning before the guests came, "if Miss Cameron were very fascinating I shouldn't have dared to ask her. It wouldn't be fair to Keith to expose him to any dangers of that sort."

Sir Lewis smiled, half dreamily. "You are very careful, mother!"

"I am very fond of Keith," replied Mrs. Allonby, "and I should never forgive myself if any carelessness of mine wrecked the dear boy's prospects."

"Well, I don't think you need be afraid, mother. I fancy Alice Cameron is not likely to work havoc with Keith's heart."

It was a very pleasant party just those five—Sir Lewis, his friend, the two girls, and the quiet, kindly hostess. Sometimes there were friends in the evening. Then there were drives and walks, skating excursions, long rides through the beautiful country, plenty of charming nooks; in short, Mrs. Allonby did her utmost to please her young guests, and she succeeded. Molly felt simply as though she were living in some happy dream, while Alice had but one trouble—why did not Sir Lewis speak out?

"You see, Molly," for lack of a better confidante she was forced to talk to Molly in these days, "there is not the slightest cause for delay!"

"No," said Molly, slowly, "I suppose not!"

"He must be in love with me, or he would never have got Mrs. Allonby to ask me here. Mother says she would not have either of the others; she had set her mind on me. Besides, we are always paired off together. He must want to marry me, I am quite sure of it, and yet we have been here nearly three weeks! The day after to-morrow we are going home, and yet he has never said a single word of his wishes! It is most extraordinary!"

"Perhaps he is shy!" suggested Molly, feeling something was expected of her. "He may think you have not known him long enough."

"Then it's very foolish of him," said Alice, pettishly. "He can't expect me to propose to him. Here we are going home in two days, and nothing settled at all. The girls will tease my life out."

"Our visit has flown," said Molly, with a sigh. "I'm sure it doesn't seem a week since we came!"

"Well, it's nearly three. I don't expect we shall be staying here again until I am married. If you behave nicely I may invite you then. I must say you have improved very much, Molly!"

"Will Mrs. Allonby live with you, Alice?"

"Heaven forbid! I don't think she likes me any better than I do her. Well, I wish Sir Lewis would be a little quicker. One thing, Mr. Durant is going away to-morrow; perhaps he's waiting for that, and thinks he shall have a better opportunity."

Molly looked up.

"Mr. Durant going away! Why?"

"My good child, he can't live here. He has been at the Towers over seven weeks. I think myself it is high time he went home."

"And how did you hear it?"

"He told me himself. It seems his grandfather has come up to town for the season, and wants him."

"Then he won't come back?"

"Not for ages. Why, Molly, he doesn't live here. You seem to think the Towers his home!"

Mrs. Allonby had a headache that afternoon.

Sir Lewis and Alice drove into Netherton to settle with Mrs. Cameron the time of the girl's return.

Mr. Durant had gone out, perhaps also to Netherton.

Molly had the afternoon at her own disposal. A strange pain was tugging at her heart. The pleasure of the last three weeks seemed almost forgotten. She was again the little lonely waif whom no one loved. Poor child! she did not know what made all the world seem blank to her just because Keith Durant was going away.

She stood leaning against a tree, much in the same way as she had stood on her birthday, when she had first seen Mr. Durant. How very long ago it seemed! Counting by days and weeks it was less than two months, but to the girlish heart it was an eternity.

Nothing would ever be the same again. This taste of pleasure, this glimpse of happiness, had spoiled poor little Cinderella for her hard, toilsome life. Never more could she be content to be the humble little drudge in the red-brick house. No; she could never stay at Netherton now; she would always be thinking of the Towers, and the happy time she had spent there. No; like her mother, she would go out into the world and seek her fortune.

"It is such a beautiful world!" said Molly, half unconsciously speaking her thoughts aloud. "Surely, somewhere in it there must be a little niche for me!"

"Molly!"

She looked up. Keith Durant stood at her side. How long he had been there she had no idea. Molly thought of her tear-stained cheeks and blushed. Perhaps Mr. Durant really liked her as a little childish friend, and had come to find her, that they two might have a last little chat together before he went away to-morrow.

"What is the matter, Miss Molly? What have you been crying for?"

"Nothing," said Molly, stoutly; "and I haven't been crying—at least, not much."

Keith smiled half-sadly.

"Molly, you can't deceive me, and I know you have been crying. Won't you tell me what has happened to trouble you?"

No answer.

Mr. Durant persisted.

"I thought," he said, reproachfully, "we were to be friends? Friends have no secrets from each other, Molly."

Molly looked up, her beautiful brown eyes shining through a mist of tears.

"You will only laugh at me," she said, simply. "Alice said you were going away to-morrow."

"And you were sorry?"

"I couldn't help it," whispered Molly; "you have been so kind to me, and I have so few friends."

"Molly," said Keith, suddenly, "do you know what brought me into the grounds this afternoon?"

Molly shook her head.

"I wanted to find you."

"To say good-bye?"

"To ask you a question; to tell you something that has been in my thoughts for days, only I was so afraid of frightening you I put it off."

"And now I have heard it from someone else I wish you had told me, Mr. Durant. When Alice said it it seemed so sudden!"

"Said what?"

"That you were going away."

"What else did she say?"

"Your grandfather had gone to London for the season, and wanted you. Alice does not think you will ever come back to the Towers."

"She is right there," said Keith Durant, slowly. "If a fear that troubles me is true it will be years before I come back to Lewis Allonby's house; but, Molly, that does not mean I shall not come back to you. There are plenty of hotels in Netherton where I can stay if only you will give me the answer to my question that I long for."

No suspicion of his meaning came to Molly. She said, quietly,—

"I don't think I shall be in Netherton much longer either. If only Uncle John will let me I mean to go away."

"Will you come to me, Molly?"

"I couldn't," said Molly, simply. "You would not have any situation for me."

"Molly, what a child you are! Don't you know the question I want to ask you? Darling, it is this. I love you better than the whole world. I want you to put your little hand in mine and promise to be my wife?"

"Me!" exclaimed Molly; "but I never dreamed of such a thing as being married!"

"But I have dreamed of marrying you, dear, almost ever since that afternoon in the wood when I met you and you gave me a violet. I have that flower now, Molly, and I shall never part with it while I live."

"But I am only a burden to every one connected with me," protested Molly. "Aunt Susan has told me so again and again."

"Nevertheless, I ask nothing better than to have the task of obervishing that 'burden' for ever. Molly, darling, won't you believe me?"

"It is so strange!"

"Sweetheart, it would be stranger if I did not love you, for you have a face to take a man's heart by storm. I should have told you so before only I did not dare. You were such a child, and I had so little to offer you."

"You have love," whispered Molly, "and that is best of all!"

"I hope you will always think so, sweetheart. But, Molly, do you know I am a poor man?"

Molly's eyes did not seem one whit shadowed by this announcement. Durant pressed the little hand he held to his lips, and went on.

"It is quite true, dear! I am a poor man in two senses. I have no profession and I belong to a family used to keep up a great deal of show. I have led an idle, aimless life, my darling! While my grandfather lived I knew a luxurious house was ever open to me, and so I never troubled to be independent; but all that shall be changed now. I will take the first post I can get, and work as I never worked before for my darling, if only you will give me a hope, Molly, that this little hand shall be my reward!"

Molly looked into his eyes.

"I love you," she whispered; "I never knew it till now, but I love you just as you do me."

He put his arm round her and kissed her. The world seemed very bright to Molly. She was a little waif no longer. She had someone to care for her now, and to stand between her and all sorrow.

"You are quite sure!" pleaded the girlish voice. "Oh! Mr."

Durant, if you grew tired of me and I felt your love had left me it would break my heart!"

"I am quite sure, darling, I shall never love anyone in the world as I do my brown-eyed Molly. I only wish I could go to Mr. Cameron now, and ask him for his treasure."

Molly gravely, "Uncle John will think you mad!"

"Never mind what he thinks. Molly, I should like to go to him this moment; but for the sake of the future, for both our interests, I think none must know of our love until I have spoken to my grandfather."

"Lord Ogilvie!"

"Yes! How scared you look, dear! Surely, Molly, you are not afraid of him?"

"He will not like you to marry me!"

It was so entirely the truth that Keith was at a loss to answer. He would not admit that she was right. He could not tell a lie, and say the Earl would be pleased at their engagement.

"He must learn to love you when he sees you," said Keith, warmly, "and, Molly, he has been so good to me. All these years he has been the kindest and best of fathers to me. For my sake, sweetheart, you will try to like him?"

Molly promised.

"And, dear, in a very little while, a week at the longest, I hope to be back in Netherpton, and able to plead my cause with your uncle. You can trust me till then, can't you, little Molly?"

"I can trust you for ever!"

Keith stroked her hair caressingly.

"Before another Christmas I hope we shall be together for all time. Molly, you must carry a bunch of violets when we are married. They are just like you. I shall never smell the perfume of sweet violets now without thinking of Miss Molly."

The girl clung to him with a little cry.

"Mr. Durant, do you think your mother will like me?"

"Not Mr. Durant, Molly! I must be Keith to you now and henceforward."

"Keith then!"

Never had his name sounded so sweet to him before. He bent and kissed her.

"What were you asking me, Molly?"

"Will your mother like me?"

"She won't be able to help it even if she tries."

But Molly knew from the very tone of his voice he believed Lady Alice would make the effort he had declared would be a failure.

It was getting dark when the two reluctantly turned their faces homewards.

"Keith!" said Molly, half timidly, "I do so wish I might tell Mrs. Allonby. She has been so good to me, it seems ungrateful not to let her know of my happiness."

"You must tell no one until I have spoken to your uncle, Molly, and Mrs. Allonby, or Lewis least of all."

"I thought they were your best friends?"

"So they are. Do not let the delay trouble you, little girl. In a week's time all the world shall know that I have won Miss Molly."

Molly hesitated.

"And you will tell me if you change your mind?"

Keith started.

"Dear, what makes you think me fickle? I don't ask you to be so careful."

"But it is so different."

"I don't see it."

"You have noble relations, who think a great deal of you," persisted Molly. "You have, as you said just now, a luxurious home. Now, it seems to me, they may all turn against you, the Earl, your mother, and the rest, when they hear you are going to marry a poor little waif, whom no one cares for. If you have to choose between them and me, it may seem a sacrifice to be true to Molly!"

Mr. Durant smiled.

"Well, in a week's time I shall have dispelled your doubts for ever. If I am not here in a week, Molly, you will be able to think me as base as you please. But I shall be here, even if I have to walk every step of the way!"

"And you will find me waiting."

He smiled.

"Ah, Molly, don't you think it's my turn to be sceptical now? What if you find those brown eyes might win the heart of a far better man? What if, instead of a careless fellow, with four hundred a year, a county magnate, with more thousands than he could spend, came to woo my Molly?"

"It would be no use!" said Molly, firmly. "You know I belong to you, Keith, and I shall never change!"

CHAPTER IV.

"It is high time they were married."

The scene was a small library in a stately Belgravian mansion. An old gentleman sat at the covered table, apparently lost in thought, his companion a stately and still beautifully woman, who looked less than her real age, which was among the forties. She was talking with great animation, her face lighted up by her eagerness, but she failed to awaken the least excitement in her father. Possibly, at

seventy-two, Lord Ogilvie took all things more tranquilly than Lady Alice Durant.

He was a very striking-looking man, but his face was shadowed by a great sadness. One of the wealthiest nobles of the day, of great intelligence, and eagerly courted by statesmen for his political talents, popular with his equals, adored by his tenants and servants, it seemed passing strange that Lord Ogilvie never gave you the impression of being a happy man.

Of course he had had great domestic sorrows. He lost his wife when he was only thirty-five, and thus had had to live more than half his life without her.

Of the six fair children she bequeathed him five had already followed her into the silent land. Three died unmarried. A fourth offended his father by refusing the wife selected for him, became an alien from home, and only re-entered his father's house to die. The other two of the flock were daughters, and both married early men with every desirable quality save fortune. Both were widowed young, and returned to make the sunshine of their father's desolate home.

Beatrice Hurst soon followed her husband. She declared she had loved him too well to live without him. Her sister remained Lady Chatelsaine, of Ogilvie Castle and the Belgravian mansion, companion and secretary to the Earl, mother and guardian of the two children, Sybil Hurst and Keith Durant!

Lady Alice was intensely proud. She had married for love; but this seemed the one weakness of her life. After her husband's death she gave herself over solely to ambition. To bring up her boy to be rich and great was her one aim. To her mind it was a cruel wrong that, since Beatrice had been a year her senior, her father's great wealth and broad lands must pass to Sybil Hurst instead of to Keith Durant. The entail was so strict that save the title—which went to a distant cousin—everything must be Sybil's.

The Earl, of course, could dispose as he pleased of his savings, but they would not satisfy Lady Alice's ambition. Therefore, before Sybil left off pinafores, her aunt had followed the brilliant idea of a marriage between the cousins.

How she laboured for this end no one would believe. It seemed to her the most natural arrangement. There were four years between the pair. They were, of course, well acquainted, but had never been allowed to grow fraternal in their intercourse. Nothing had been said publicly of the scheme, and yet the two young people knew perfectly what was expected of them, and all Lady Alice's intimates looked on them as engaged.

It was this which Mrs. Allonby had had in her thoughts when she told her son she would not have invited Alice Cameron had she been very fascinating, since it was not fair to Keith to expose him to dangers of that sort.

The mistress of the Towers regarded the match as a settled thing.

Keith had a double motive in urging Molly to keep their secret from their hostess. He feared not only had Mrs. Allonby other views for her little protégée, but she would have considered his love for Molly as downright treachery to his cousin.

Keith could not exactly define his own feelings for Sybil. He had known what was expected of him for years. He had not one spark of love for Miss Hurst, but he got on with her.

She did not expect any very elaborate courtship, was a fine-looking girl, and a wife any man might have been proud of. But for that meeting in the wood, but for his introduction to Molly, it is quite possible Keith might have married his cousin, and believed the calm regard he felt for her the strongest sentiment his heart was capable of.

And now, the evening before his return—the very day on which he had plighted his troth to Molly—his mother quietly said to the Earl, alluding to her son and Sybil,—

"It is high time they were married!"

Lord Ogilvie did not answer at first. A man of few words he was very much under his daughter's influence; but Lady Alice, who understood him thoroughly, did not like his seeming indifference, and rejoined,—

"Papa, do put away your book and listen to me. Keith is six-and-twenty. This will be Sybil's fourth London season. There is nothing in the world for them to wait for. Don't you think they had better be married at Easter?"

"If they wish it, my dear!"

The reply, simple and acquiescent though it was, highly displeased Lady Alice. Perhaps she resented the degree of doubt in the "if!"

"Of course they wish it. Haven't they been in love with each other ever since they were little bits of children!"

"I never thought so."

"Papa," pleaded the widow, fairly brought to bay, "do, please, say what you mean plainly. I can't bear your seeming to agree with me, and then raising difficulties."

Lord Ogilvie changed his manner.

"Alice, I made up my mind, after poor Jim's troubles, I would never interfere in the matter of marriage again. If your boy and Sybil fancy each other well and good. He will have a fine fortune, and the girl will gain a good husband; but I won't interfere with them."

"They are devoted to each other!"

Lord Ogilvie shrugged his shoulders.

"They don't quarrel, and they seek each other's society about as

much as two young people, who are the only youthful ones in a family of elderly folk mostly do—that's all."

"I mean to speak to Keith!"

"And then?"

"I shall tell him he is treating Sybil unfairly. The engagement ought either to be publicly announced, or the report of it contradicted. The girl will never have any suitable offers while people believe her a fiancée."

"Please yourself, Alice"—here the old man's voice grew sad—"Heaven knows I would alter things if I could, and make Keith my heir. The boy is a true Tempest—generous and loyal to the core! He has poor Durant's charm of manner, too. One's whole heart goes out to him, while, though Beatrice was the apple of my eye and her husband worthy of her, I never could care for their child!"

"Sybil is a darling!"

"I knew she is very popular, and will never lack friends. A charming girl, according to all accounts; but, Alice, nature made one fatal defect in Sybil—she has no heart!"

"Papa!"

"It is quite true, my dear. I don't deny she has some mechanical substitute which performs all the proper functions of the missing organ so far as her bodily health is concerned, but as regards other people, I repeat, emphatically, Sybil has no heart!"

"She is the most dutiful girl!"

"Possibly; but she has no heart. I assure you, Alice, it bewilders me. Her father was the most impulsive, loving nature. Her mother was so sensitive that she faded out of life just because it was a weariness to live without him. And yet the only child of such a pair is heartless!"

"I think, papa, you are hard on Sybil."

"Not a bit of it, my dear. I am prepared to act most generously to her. I will provide her with a priceless trousseau; the family jewels shall be reset as soon as she is likely to need them; and I mean to refurbish the dower house and settle that residence and five thousand a year upon her until such time as my death makes her lady of the Castle."

"And I may tell Keith?"

"Tell him what I am willing to do for Sybil, and that I am ready to consent to the match; but don't tell him I am eager for it, for I assure you I am not."

"He will be home to-morrow!"

"Yes; he has stayed a long time with the Allonbys. Sir Lewis has no sister, I suppose?"

Alice Durant flushed at the implied suggestion.

"If he had a dozen Keith is too honourable to forget his obligations to his cousin."

"He hasn't got any, my dear!"

Lady Alice felt so sure of her son's compliance—so certain of his falling in with her wishes—that a letter she received the next morning was a terrible shock to her.

Thinking over his mother's hopes after his parting with Molly, the idea came to Keith it would soften the blow if she had some slight preparation for it; and so, instead of waiting for his return, he wrote by the night post only a few lines, but sufficient to change the current of Alice Durant's mind, and fill her with speechless indignation.

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,—

"I hope to be with you to-morrow evening, but I write to ask you to prepare my grandfather for a surprise. I want him to forget the old plan of a marriage between Sybil and myself. Even if my cousin would consent to the match (which I have no grounds for hoping), it is out of the question, for I have lost my heart to another. I won't describe her to you now, or my letter would run on indefinitely. Miss Lester has been staying here for the last three weeks. She is the niece of a Mr. Cameron, the lawyer who manages the Allonby estates. Lewis and I have seen a good deal of the family, and Molly is a great favourite with Mrs. Allonby. She is only eighteen, an orphan, and portionless; but we are neither of us ambitious, and we mean to be very happy on my four hundred a year until grandfather can get me some appointment abroad. Believe me, mother, I shall be far happier with my darling than sharing the wealth of an unbeloved wife. You must love my Molly when you know her. Deferring all else till we meet—I am, dear mother, your loving son,

KEITH TEMPEST DURANT."

Lady Alice was too horrified to face the company of her father and Sybil; she sent word she had a bad headache, and spent the morning in her own room, not resting, as they supposed, but racking her brain for any means of averting the terrible misfortune that threatened her.

Keith would have been wiser had he written to Lord Ogilvie instead of his mother, unless he had left both in ignorance of his plans. But the young man remembered the tragedy of his uncle's death. Boy as he had been at the time of the prodigal's return, he had never forgotten the scene.

It was a snowy night, and looking from one of the windows of Ogilvie Castle he had seen a man's form tramping wearily up the avenue. When he told the servants they declared he must be mistaken, since no knock followed. At last, to humour his whim, they opened the door an hour afterwards, and there, sure enough, half hidden by the

snow, lay a still, motionless figure, weary and footsore, overcome by long fast and hard travel.

The son had fainted just as he reached his father's door. All that care and treatment could suggest was done, but when the wanderer returned to consciousness he was in a high fever. In his delirious ravings he babbled of his wife, his darling whom he had lost, whom poverty had taken from him.

It was a terrible story. If those wild utterances were to be believed, the young wife, whom he had married two years before against his father's wishes, had died of starvation just as surely as hardships and privations had brought her husband to his end. No skill could save him. He lingered a week and then fell asleep, his trials ended for all time.

The episode had stamped itself indelibly on Keith's brain. If his grandfather left his own son to starve because he married against his wishes, he would have little sympathy with the love affairs of another generation, and so Keith confided by preference in his mother, little recking that the very memory of his uncle's fate would have enlisted his grandfather on his side.

What Lady Alice would have done to avoid the calamity threatening her we cannot say; but fate, which now and then seems (for a time) to favour the wrong side, helped her considerably. There was a fearful fog that night in London, one of the most terrible ever known. It came on about three o'clock, and shrouded the whole of the West-end in gloom.

Link boys made a fortune. Omnibuses ceased to run; in fact, very few vehicles were heard at all, and when Keith reached Paddington about six the streets were as silent and deserted as though it had been eight hours later.

With the utmost difficulty he secured a cab, but when they got to the Marble Arch the driver came to an abrupt standstill, and told his fare he dared not go any further. Foreseeing such a state of things might happen, Keith had left all his luggage at the station, except a small hand-bag. He rewarded his Jehu for the distance already traversed, and set off bravely to walk the remainder.

How it happened he never knew. Whether the denseness of the fog made sounds less distinct, whether his own thoughts rendered the young man careless it is impossible to say, but one of the few vehicles still running knocked him down, and when hours after he was expected poor Keith at last entered his grandfather's house, it was borne in the arms of two stout porters, while a policeman explained to the Earl the gentleman had met with an accident at Hyde Park Corner, and would have been taken to the hospital but for a card-case in his pocket, which proved his identity.

Lady Alice behaved with admirable calm. The moment she had wrung from the doctor the admission that the case, though dangerous, was by no means hopeless, she seemed to revive.

She was a resolute, strong-minded woman, and devoted to her son's interests. She might have very strange notions as to what was best for him, and preferred to seek his happiness after her lights instead of his own. But this much must be granted her—she loved him dearly.

Even her father was astonished at the never-failing patience with which she carried out the doctor's orders. There was plenty of assistance, of course—a trained nurse, and a whole staff of servants to carry out her orders; but still, save to snatch a few hours of needful sleep, Lady Alice never left the patient. She seemed to have no thought, no care, beyond the sick room.

It was a terrible struggle. Though no bones were broken the injuries were severe, and the shock had brought on a fever which cruelly sapped the strength. For days and weeks it was a hand-to-hand struggle with death. It was early February, when the accident happened. The April sunshine poured into the room when at last Keith opened his blue eyes and fixed them lovingly on his mother's face, and she could see the cruel fever light no longer blazed in them.

"Saved."

That was the verdict of the doctor. That was the verdict of the nurse. Mother and grandfather rejoiced their dark days were over. The young life they dearly loved was not to be taken from them. His convalescence was rapid. The third day after he came to himself he asked for paper and pencil, and began to write. Then a sudden thought seemed to come to him, and he demanded if there were no letters?

"Let him talk a little," had been the doctor's order, "and, above all things, don't dictate to him. Far better let him talk too much than agitate him by seeming to hide things from him."

With those words ringing in her ears what could Lady Alice answer but the truth—there were several letters and a parcel.

"Anything from Allonby?"

"No. Sir Lewis and his mother have not written. It seems strange for I sent a few lines to tell of your accident, but there has been no reply."

"Perhaps Mrs. Allonby is ill," said Keith, feebly.

"No. Sybil was staying near them last week, and she says the Allonbys are quite well. The mother is in high spirits, for Lewis is engaged."

"Who to?"

How feverishly eager was the voice. Lady Alice felt alarmed.

"Now, Keith, don't excite yourself, or I shall have the doctor scolding me. Sybil did not tell me the young lady's name. A neighbour, I fancy."

"Mother!" cried Keith with desperate entreaty, "bring me my letters. I must see them."

She brought a pile of notes and a curious shaped brown paper parcel, evidently sent through the "parcels' post."

Keith took the collection eagerly. He knew that Molly had his address; he had given it her himself and begged her to write to him, even though he knew a week would see him back with her.

"What is to day, mother? How long have I been lying here?"

"It is the fifth of April, Keith. Your accident was the ninth of February."

Almost two months, and he had sworn to return to her in a week. What must she think of him? His heart sank when he remembered she would be sure to hear from the Allonbys of his accident; besides, had not her sweet voice answered, when he asked her to trust him for a week, "Not a week, Keith, but for ever." Oh, yes! his Molly would be true to him. He need not fear.

With his thin, white fingers which were strangely changed by those weeks of illness, Keith Durant turned slowly over the letters. At last he came to one with the Netherton postmark, directed in a clear, girlish hand. He tore it open, and read the hurried lines. Alas! she had not trusted him.

"I return your flowers. Forget that you ever knew me. It is all that I shall ever ask of you.—MOLLY."

Surely a cruel letter for a man to read while he lies on what might have been his death-bed! Keith's heart sank. Then a hope struck him.

Molly had implored him to let her know if the persuasions of his relations changed his mind. He had answered nothing could do that. If he did not come in a week she might doubt him, but if alive he would come. Might not the child have remembered these words, and decided when the week passed he was faithless? If so, she needed pity at his hands, not blame.

Alas! alas! He turned to the envelope of his letter; it bore the stamp "Netherton, 10th February," the very day after his accident, when only one of the seven days he had told her he might be detained was over, Molly had written to renounce him.

What could it mean? Had anyone prejudiced her against him, or— The truth broke on him at last. From the very moment of their first call at the red-brick house Keith had feared Lewis Allonby shared his admiration for Molly.

As the days wore on a hundred little trifles confirmed the fear that in the matter nearest his heart his favourite friend was his rival. He had cautioned Molly not to take Mrs. Allonby into confidence, because apart from that lady believing him pledged to Sybil, he felt she wanted Molly for her son.

The thing was as clear as day. As soon as he had gone Lewis Allonby spoke out, and the Baronet's thousands, the title he could give her, seemed to Molly better worth than the passionate affection of an honest heart. The very day of her return to her uncle's house she packed up his flowers and sent her little letter of renunciation; and when he lay hovering between life and death the two creatures he had best loved were happy together. That was the true meaning of it. Sybil's news meant that the young lady Sir Lewis was engaged to—a neighbour she believed—was Molly.

Lady Alice watched her son in perfect silence. When she saw him close his eyes, she came forward to remove the letters, save the one Keith had opened, which he still had clasped in his weak, nerveless hand. He suffered her in silence, only when she touched the parcel he shook his head.

"Leave that please?"

And the first time he was alone, although forbidden to leave his bed, Keith Durant rose and dropped the parcel just as it was into the fire. He nearly sent the letter after it, but some strange influence held him back. That and the violet Molly had given him at their first meeting were folded away in his pocket-book.

When the doctor came the next day he shook his head, and talked of a relapse.

"You must be careful, Mr. Durant, or we shall have all our work to do again."

"Couldn't you do it again with a different ending?" said Keith, gloomily. "I'm sure I see nothing in life worth struggling for."

And his mother, standing by, heard these words, yet her heart did not feel one pang of remorse. She still felt she had done her duty; that, given the opportunity to act differently, she would have refused it.

CHAPTER V.

MR. CAMERON was sitting in his office, with a grave shadow on his face. It was a month since Alice and her cousin returned from the Towers. His wife and daughter were daily expecting Sir Lewis to "speak out." He himself marvelled at their hopefulness in supposing a wealthy Baronet would propose to a lawyer's daughter, yet he could not deny that Sir Lewis came very often to the red-brick house, and seemed to enjoy his visits, yet the truth never dawned on him till this particularly blustering March day, when, after nearly an hour's interview, Sir Lewis had left him after fulfilling Mrs. Cameron's desire in one point, since he most certainly "spoke out," but disappointing it grievously in another, since his story had nothing whatever to do with her daughter.

Sir Lewis first asked the lawyer to regard their interview as

confidential, and next begged him not to take offence at anything he might say.

This was bewildering enough, but when the Baronet went on to add he loved Mary Lester, and had asked her to be his wife, Mr. Cameron was simply bewildered.

"I have not come to you to bemoan my own disappointment," said the young man, gravely. "I could no more keep from loving her than the sun can help shining, and I don't regret it. The very loving such a girl as Molly will make a better man of me."

"Then you mean she refused you?"

"Just that, Mr. Cameron. I had very little hope, I confess. I know that my wealth, my beautiful home, and the title my wife must bear might influence many girls; but I felt, from the first, they would have no power with Molly unless she loved me she would send me away, but she was so dear to me I risked all—and failed."

The lawyer was amazed, but discreetly said nothing. Sir Lewis explained that for Molly's sake he thought it would be better for her to be away, and suggested that she should go as companion to a favourite cousin, Lady Bruce of Woodside. After much discussion this was agreed to. Why had Molly sent back to Keith his flowers, and was evidently fading slowly away?

A word will answer the question. Looked away in her desk was a little note written by the man who, two days before, had wooed her with passionate love, and whose faith she had never doubted?

Keith had been constant to her barely forty-eight hours, and Molly would love him all her life. It seemed strange their natures should be so different!

Lady Alice Durant had done her work well. Molly never dreamed for one moment that the note which bore Keith's monogram and was sealed by his crest could have been written by any other than himself.

It came to her the morning of her return to Netherton. One of Molly's duties was to open the door when the servants were busy. On this occasion the postman gave her quite a pile of letters, and she slipped the one addressed to herself into her pocket and stole upstairs as soon as she could steal off unperceived.

With what rapture she looked at the address traced by her lover's hand! With what sweet stolen caress she pressed his writing to her lips! In what a delighted expectation she began to read her first love-letter.

She was a child, a tender, loving child, when she unfastened the letter. When she had read it she was an unhappy, disappointed woman.

"DEAR MISS LESTER,—

"I grieve to say that neither my mother nor her father will hear of a marriage between us. I am well aware that you have my promise, and can exact its fulfilment; but as to do so would blast my whole future, make an endless breach between me and my family, and reduce me to well-nigh beggary, I hope you may be disposed to a more lenient course. If you will forget my foolish declaration and give me my freedom, I shall not only be deeply grateful to you, but my mother and Lord Ogilvie will be disposed to reward your kindness in some substantial manner. Hoping you may see the wisdom of this course, I am, dear Miss Lester, your friend and well-wisher,

"KEITH DURANT."

"How could he?" was the cry of the girl's broken heart. "How could he write to me like that? He knew perfectly well he had only to tell me he repented his promise, and I should have restored it to him. But to offer me a 'substantial reward' for his freedom is an insult—a cruel insult!"

That very night she posted her reply and despatched the flowers. She never hesitated for an instant. It seemed to her, poor child, that the Keith Durant of her love had never existed at all. She had been taken in by some inferior nature, whom her fancy had idealised into a hero.

The blow had fallen, and was decisive. At least she was spared suspense. She had just this consolation in her sorrow—she knew the worst!

But the knowledge wrought a change in her, and she felt it dimly even herself. She was as one stunned by a grievous blow. She seemed deadened to all feeling, incapable of joy or sorrow. She had no hopes, no fears, and she might have sunk into a confirmed morbid state but for Lewis Allonby and his love-story.

The Baronet told Mr. Cameron sadly he could do nothing for Molly; but he was mistaken. His love, its generosity, its selflessness, restored her faith in human nature. She felt, as she listened to him, as he flung his title, riches, and honours at her feet, seeming to count them as nothing for the love he bore her—she felt then, I say, that though she had been deceived in Keith, yet noble natures *did* exist. There were men true, noble, and self-denying, though he was not of them.

A great longing came to the poor child to sob out her story, to throw herself on his compassion, and tell him that, though she could not love him, she would be to him a faithful wife; but Molly was too generous and high-souled to yield to this temptation. She could not take all from Sir Lewis and give nothing in return, just the same as she could not, for the sake of sympathy with her sorrow, betray Keith Durant's cruelty to his friend. She refused Sir Lewis in such a way as to make him feel her decision was unchangeable, but she never mentioned to him the name in both their thoughts. It was over.

Only three months before Molly had longed for a change. Only three months before she had felt like a poor caged bird beating its wings against the doors of its prison. She had thought once free from the dull, red-brick house, once clear escaped from the life of drudgery, she must be happy. Well, now the cage door was opened, the captive was set free, and yet Molly felt as far from happiness as on that birthday afternoon when she wandered in the Allonby Woods and met her fond, false lover.

At a little wayside station on the way to Woodside a child came to the window selling flowers; and Molly, impelled by an impulse she could not resist, bought a bunch of sweet violets and fastened them in her jacket. They were fresh and fair, though these other flowers, which had once brought her such joy, were faded and gone. Was it an omen that there were other pleasures in store for her, even though love was denied her?

A strange peace stole over the girlish heart. She would never put another in Keith's place, never trust to a lover's voice again; but, after all, the world was not made up only of those who married and were given in marriage. Friendship, kindness, sympathy, companionship, all these were open to her. If Lady Bruce was at all like her aunt she thought she could be happy at Woodside, even though Keith's love had failed her.

The Misses Cameron had been much excited at the idea of their cousin residing in a nobleman's family, but Molly took the dignity very simply. Her uncle said Lady Bruce might one day be a duchess, but that did not make Molly afraid of her; she was Mrs. Allonby's niece, and the gentle mistress of the Towers was Molly's ideal of womanhood. Besides, she was not likely to see much of the grown-up people; her life would be spent chiefly in the schoolroom, and with the children. She hoped they were pretty, and felt thankful they were not boys; Mrs. Cameron's sweet lambs having given her a wholesome dread of young specimens of the masculine genus.

Molly left home at ten for her new life, and it was positively six before, tired and weary, she at last saw the welcome name "Woodside," painted in unmistakable black letters on a white board.

"At last!" was the feeling of Molly's heart, as taking up her little handbag and bundle of umbrellas she stepped on to the platform; but the relief gave way soon to a little dread. Had any one come to meet her. If not, how would she accomplish the seven miles yet remaining of her journey? But this trouble was soon dispelled, for an elderly lady came forward, and said pleasantly—

"I think you must be Miss Lester?"

She confessed afterwards she was driven to this opinion because no other passenger alighted; not because Molly at all accorded with her preconceived portrait of her daughter's governess. As the girl simply announced her identity, a puzzled look came into the lady's face, but she said nothing until they were seated in the carriage.

"Lady Bruce would have come to meet you, but she has a cold. My daughter is not very strong, Miss Lester."

Molly made some slight reply, and again the puzzled look came into her companion's face.

"I think I must introduce myself, Miss Lester. I am Lady Yorke, the grandmother of your pupils. I hear you know my sister, Mrs. Allonby, very well?"

Molly's eyes brightened at once.

"Mrs. Allonby is the truest friend I ever had!" she said, eagerly. "She was so good to me!"

"Did she ever tell you you were like someone she used to know?" asked Lady Yorke.

"Yes. At first she told me she thought she must have seen me before."

"Ah! Then she saw it too! The likeness has been puzzling me ever since I saw you. I suppose you have no relations called Cameron?"

"I have spent all my life with Mr. Cameron. My mother was his only sister."

"Then she is dead?"

"She died when I was two years old. Oh, Lady Yorke! did you know her?"

"Yes," said the lady, gently; "and it is of her you reminded me and my sister. Very nearly twenty years' ago I engaged a young governess for my child—even just as Lady Bruce has engaged you now. Her name was Mary Lisle Cameron, but because we had friends of the name of Cameron we called her Miss Lisle. She left me to be married. I think you must be her daughter. Evelyn will be delighted. Though your mother was with us so short a time we loved her dearly. It does seem strange that her child should come to teach my little granddaughter!"

There was no time for more. The carriage had passed through the lodge gates, and now stopped before the entrance to the Grange.

Evidently it was the house of wealth. A large fire blazed in the hall, and two man-servants came forward with respectful alacrity to receive Lady Yorke and her young companion.

CHAPTER VI.

Sorrow seldom kills, though I grant that worry yearly slays its thousands.

An intense and grievous disappointment, an overwhelming grief falling on us, may change our whole nature, sour our dispositions, and blight our future, but, I repeat, it seldom kills. It is daily, incessant

worry, an hourly straggle with foes and difficulties, an ever-constant conflict between hope and fear, an endless effort to be brave, which exhausts our energies and saps our strength. We most of us have sufficient elasticity for our hearts to rebound after one blow, however crushing; but who among us can endure a constant series of overthrows, and yet remain unshattered?

So it was with Keith Durant. Up to the time of his accident in the fog all things had gone well with him.

Too young at the date of his father's death to realise his loss, it may be truly said he had never known a sorrow until the girl he loved wrote renouncing him for ever.

It was a terrible blow! It destroyed his hope and faith; it killed all his fair dreams for the future, and no doubt it materially retarded his recovery, but it did not break his heart.

Keith struggled slowly back from the gates of the valley of the shadow of death, until, when the June roses came in bloom, he was himself again—as strong and well as before that fatal accident.

Himself again! The doctors said so. It was a complete recovery, and, so far as mere physical strength was concerned, no doubt Keith was unaltered. But when he began to return to the dull routine of everyday life those around him saw a difference.

Keith had been emphatically young for his years, with a boy's relish for fun, a never-failing cheerfulness which brightened those around him. He had been the very life of his grandfather's home, and Lord Ogilvie was the first to notice the change.

His grandson seemed a different person—cold and sarcastic, brilliantly witty at times, at others almost morbidly quiet and silent.

Keith seemed to live within himself. He never spoke a word of his feelings or thoughts, he never made the least allusion to his future. He might have been forty instead of twenty-six; and, instead of bringing cheerfulness into the house, his cold, cynical manner alarmed servants and visitors.

The Earl waited, hoping with returning strength the change would disappear. Finding it didn't, without a word to his daughter he spoke to the young man himself.

"Is there anything on your mind, Keith?"

Keith started. At that moment he had been wondering why Lewis Allonby did not write to tell him of his engagement, and whether it would be long before his false love of other days became "my lady." It had been an old promise between him and Lewis that the first of them who married should claim the other as groom's-man. Unless Molly purposely sowed dissension between them, and prejudiced Sir Lewis against him, the Baronet was not likely to forget the old compact. When the invitation came, should he accept it? He was still far from a conclusion when his grandfather's question aroused him.

"Is there anything on your mind, Keith?"

Keith lifted his head; shook himself after the fashion of a Newfoundland dog, and answered,—

"No, my lord. What should there be?"

"You seem out of spirits—depressed."

Keith felt puzzled; he really loved Lord Ogilvie, and could not find it in his heart to refuse his anxiety as he would have done another's.

"Four months of illness do not tend to raise a man's spirits."

"But you are well now?"

"Perfectly."

"It's no use your trying to deceive me, Keith," said the old man, gently. "I am convinced there is more than the memory of physical illness troubling you. My boy, don't you know I would help you to the utmost of my power? Make a list of your debts, and let me see what I can do."

Keith smiled.

"My dear grandfather, it is just like you to offer it, but, unless we think of the doctor's bill—which may be alarming—I don't owe a penny in the world!"

"Then what is it?"

"What is what?"

"Your trouble."

"I cannot tell you. It is not debt, be assured of that; and I have nothing to be ashamed of, I assure you."

"Then I can guess it."

"I don't think so."

"You have found out you cannot carry out your mother's wish and marry Sybil, and you shrink from telling her so!"

Keith started. Till that moment he had completely forgotten Sybil Hurst.

"I am not in love with my cousin," he said, slowly, "not the least in the world, but I don't think the omission troubles me."

Lord Ogilvie came a little nearer.

"My boy," he said, kindly, "I don't deny that you would be a richer man than I can make you if you married Sybil Hurst, but whatever your mother may think you are in no wise bound to do so. I have fancied lately you may have found out you care for someone else!"

"And then—"

The Earl sighed.

"I opposed one marriage once, Keith, bitterly. I did not succeed in preventing it, but my harshness brought bitter sorrow on myself, and in the end lost my son's life. I took a solemn oath then, Keith, that I would never again interfere to prevent a marriage. If you care for anyone who is a lady in mind and feeling (I don't think you *could* care for one who was not), you shall never hear a word from me of

the family arrangement for you to wed your cousin, and I will do the best I can to start you and your wife comfortably in life. I have saved money, and I tell you frankly I shall leave Sybil nothing beyond what the law gives her. The curtailed property makes her a great heiress; all else I always meant for you!"

"You are kinder to me than I deserve. But there is not a woman in England I desire to marry!" answered poor Keith, sadly.

"Is there one out of England? Your father was of French extraction. There would be nothing wonderful in your having a French bride."

"I know of no one I wish to marry, grandfather, and I know of nothing I want to do. I seem aimless, purposeless!"

"That's bad," said the Earl, gravely. "What's become of your friend Allonby? Surely he could help you shake off this fit of the blues?"

"Allonby is going to be married, and I haven't heard from him for ages!"

Lord Ogilvie was very quick at seeing things, despite his seventy odd years. He jumped to a conclusion which was not entirely right, but yet could not be called a mistake. He felt certain Keith had been in love, and that Sir Lewis was his successful rival! So far, his idea was that of Keith himself; but he never dreamed of the treachery played on his boy—the bright dreams of happiness, the long engagement, and the cruel awakening.

"Then, of course, he is too busy to come here?" said Lord Ogilvie, cheerfully. "And I suppose you would not care to go to the Towers?"

"I'd rather go to Jericho!" said Keith, crossly. "A stupid, hateful place! I shall never set my foot in it again!"

"I am going down to Ogilvie Castle the first week in July, and I suppose Sybil will have tired out Mrs. Devereux's patience by then!"

Mrs. Devereux had been kind enough to chaperone the heiress, since, of course, at the beginning of the season Lady Alice could not leave her son.

Somehow, Sybil had seemed to prefer that the arrangement should continue; so Mrs. Devereux, a distant cousin—and rather poor one—had received a very liberal cheque for Miss Hurst's expenses, and would only restore her to her family when they migrated to the country.

Keith looked up quickly.

"I have not seen Sybil for ages!"

"No? Keith, I have not the slightest wish to bias you, but I think you ought to make up your mind. Either come with us to Ogilvie and propose to Sybil, or stay away and let your mother announce to one or two talkative friends that there is no idea of a marriage between you. I think the matter should be set at rest one way or the other!"

"So do I."

"Your mother's wishes are set on it, but I don't think they ought to weigh with you against your own. We are a long-lived race, and it is highly probable I may last another fifteen years. While I live Sybil will never have the power to deprive your mother of her home at Ogilvie!"

"I don't think Sybil would wish to. She and the *mater* are excellent friends!"

The Earl sighed.

"She is my own grandchild, and the daughter of two of the finest natures I ever met; and yet, Keith, I have never cared for Sybil. She seems to be almost heartless!"

Mr. Durant smiled a little sarcastically.

"Yet you advise me to marry her?"

"I do not advise it!"

"You seem to."

"Until this morning I thought it would be a terrible mistake for Sybil to become your wife!"

"And what has changed our opinion?"

The old man hesitated.

"I may be mistaken, but it strikes me, Keith, the love of your heart has been given already—and given in vain!"

"And if it were so?"

"If it were so! As the Tempests are not given to love twice, you will never have more than affection and respect to offer a wife. Better marry a proud, resolute nature like Sybil's than a gentle, clinging girl, who might break her heart if she discovered your love did not equal hers!"

"Perhaps you are right," said Keith, slowly. "If I never can love any woman it will be a relief to be spared the semblance of a courtship. I fancy Sybil would be content with a very dignified wooing. She is as unromantic as myself!"

"And the other attachment—you admit there is one—is in vain?"

"There was one," answered Keith, bitterly; "but it is dead and gone. I would not wed the woman I once worshipped if there were no other in the wide world!"

"Then you are free?"

"Utterly and entirely free."

"It wants nearly a fortnight to our going to Ogilvie, Keith. In that time you ought to be able to make up your mind!"

But Keith found the decision difficult. He was quite as willing to marry Sybil as to marry anyone else, but he had no particular wish for matrimony at all. Still he could not go on living his dreary, aimless life. A wedding with his cousin would give him wealth in the present and vast riches in the future; the home of his childhood

would be his inheritance. He would go into Parliament, and win a name and fame.

He went to Ogilvie about a week after the family had returned there, and his very coming told his mother and the Earl of his intentions. He was given every opportunity of holding *à-la-tête* with his cousin, and yet he found the momentous question very difficult to put.

It came at last—the opportunity dreaded and yet desired; and truly no two scenes could have been more different than that of his proposal to Molly and this of his wooing Miss Hurst.

It was summer instead of winter. A dainty boudoir instead of the snow-covered woods; and instead of a little girl in tears the heroine was a stately beauty in smiles and velvet.

Sybil Hurst had a face an artist or sculptor would have raved over. It was faultless in every detail—the features perfect in their regularity, the colouring bright enough to relieve the excessive paleness of the flaxen hair. Some people said her eyes were cold and her mouth hard, but then these same features were praised by others as calm and firm. So, no doubt, the first criticism was only used by detractors, and what heiress was without enemies?

"To-morrow will be the twelfth of August," remarked Miss Hurst, unconsciously, precipitating her own fate. "Aren't you going north Keith, for the shooting?"

"I don't think so!"

"I thought you had quite recovered from the effects of that accident?"

"I believe I have; but there are other things than shooting to fill a man's mind."

"You never seemed to think of anything else!"

"I may be growing wiser. I am getting quite elderly, Sybil. Fancy, I was twenty-seven yesterday!"

"I wish you had told me it was your birthday; I would have given you a present!"

"Supposing you give me one now? Sybil, do you think you could trust your future to me. I am a plain, blunt man, and I can't make love, as they call it in books; but you have known me all your life, and if you will trust me, Sybil, I will do my best to make you happy."

Sybil Hurst hesitated. She did not love Keith, but she admired him extremely. Also she was, in her quiet way, extremely obstinate. Very possibly Miss Hurst might utter the word "obey" at the altar, but in practice she meant to wipe it out of the marriage vows. Freedom from all control was what she desired, and surely she would gain this more easily from a man who owed fortune and estates to herself than from a richer suitor! Besides, Keith seemed to favour independence, and there was no touch of jealousy in his nature.

"I think we should get on very well together," said the beauty, slowly. "I am not romantic or that sort of thing, Keith, but I have always liked you!"

"And you will be my wife?"

"Yes," she returned, quietly. "I think we are very well suited. Neither of us are romantic or sentimental, so we shall get on very well together!"

"Admirably, I trust," said Keith. Then there was a moment's hesitation. He felt he ought to kiss her. It was the correct thing under the circumstances, and yet—Perhaps the entrance of Lady Alice, who came in just then quite unexpectedly, was a greater relief to her son than she imagined, when he drew Sybil towards her and said, cheerfully,—

"You will soon have a daughter of your own, mother, for Sybil and I have agreed to go through life together!"

CHAPTER VII.

DESPITE the sorrow at her heart, despite the memory of Keith's cruel letter, Molly Lester was happy at Woodside.

She often thought if only she had come there a few months earlier, before meeting Mr. Durant. If only she had gone to Lady Bruce's, with no experience of life beyond that gained at her uncle's, she should have been perfectly radiant with joy. As it was, there was a wistful note even in her content. She was happy because every one loved her, but there were memories in the past she could never forget, and which gave her a quiet dignity in spite of her youth.

Lady Bruce loved her dearly. It may have been her remembrance of Molly's mother, and the romance which hung over her fate, which first made Evelyn take a fancy to her children's governess, but in the end she loved her for herself alone; and when, in July, Lord Bruce came home he found "Miss Lester" quite at home at Woodside, his wife treating her like a favourite younger sister, while the children just worshipped her, and the servants one and all delighted to do anything in her service.

"Isn't she pretty?" asked the Marchioness of her husband. "I think she has the sweetest face I ever saw!"

"And the saddest!"

"Edmund! Why, Molly is always cheerful! I never knew her gloomy or discontented!"

"You won't keep her long!" said the Marquis, consolingly, in his fond, teasing way. "She is quite pretty enough to take some heart by storm, and I suppose you don't keep her shut up for safety."

"You know I have had so few visitors since you were away!"

"We will have a nice quiet time," returned Lord Bruce, "and then do our duty to our friends by inviting a houseful for Christmas, and, mark my words, Evelyn, one of your guests will rob you of Miss Lester!"

But when Christmas came round Molly, of her own accord, petitioned to stay in the schoolroom. She did not care for strangers, she said. Lord and Lady Bruce expostulated, and in the end a compromise was come to. Molly and the little girls should have their meals in the schoolroom, since it really was her wish, but she must be introduced to some of the guests, and come downstairs whenever she felt dull.

"I wish aunt Allonby was coming!" lamented Lady Bruce. "She and Lewis seem quite to have forsaken me. I even sent word that I expected his favourite friend, and that did not move him to honour me with a visit!"

The paper-knife with which Molly had been toying snapped suddenly in two, but Lady Bruce never imagined any connection between her governess's sudden start and her own intelligence.

"Perhaps you have met Mr. Durant?" she went on, smiling. "I know he was a long time at the Towers last winter!"

Molly grew deadly pale, and, to her friend's dismay, she trembled like an aspen-leaf.

"My dear child!" cried Lady Bruce, thoroughly alarmed, "is there anything the matter? Have you any cause to dislike Mr. Durant?"

Molly looked wildly round the room, as though she could not understand.

"Tell me," urged the gentle peeress. "Surely, Molly, you know your secret will be safe with me! I only want to help you."

Molly looked up with an April face.

"It is all over now, only I was staying at Allonby Towers while Mr. Durant was there last year. And he thought he liked me!"

Lady Bruce started.

"A man should not think on such a subject," she said, gravely. "He ought to know his own mind, and keep to it!"

"It is all over now," said Molly, quietly. "No one ever knew of it beside our two selves. His grandfather objected very strongly, and—and there was an end of it!"

"I wish he wasn't coming," said Lady Bruce, regretfully. "He used to be a great favourite of mine—but he never will be now!"

"It will not matter," said Molly, still with that strange, far-off expression in her eyes. "You know you have promised I need not come downstairs, and—and Mr. Durant and I need never meet!"

"I feel ashamed of him!" declared her friend. "I would not have believed such a thing of him! I knew he was poor, but he has enough to live on of his own without being in thralldom to his grandfather!"

"It was better that he found it out so soon. If we had been married, and I discovered after that he regretted, I think it would have broken my heart!"

"You must show him you don't care!"

"I would rather not see him!"

Lady Bruce put one arm round her. She had something else to say, and shrank from the revelation, fearing it would pain Molly.

"Dear!" she said, in her tender way, "you shall not meet Keith Durant if I can help it, but he has been very intimate in our house. My children are very fond of him, and it maybe some accident will bring you face to face. Do you think you can bear it bravely, Molly, or would you rather go to Nesherton? I had meant you to have your holidays later, but I would rather try and spare you now than you should be troubled."

"It will not trouble me," replied Molly. "Lady Bruce, I can't explain it to you, but when Mr. Durant wrote to me I seemed to feel it was all over. I knew we were parted for ever. I felt the man I loved had never really lived, except in my own imagination. I can meet Mr. Durant quite calmly. Perhaps," noticing a shadow still on Lady Bruce's face, "he is married, and his wife will also be your guest!"

"He is not married—but he is engaged!"

"Ah!"

"His fiancée is a cousin of his own. She is considered very beautiful, but I never admired her. The marriage is a sort of family arrangement. Lord Ogilvie has but these two grandchildren, and as the estate must go to Miss Hurst, he wished Keith to marry her."

Molly wondered if Keith's opinion of consinship had changed since the day when he told her it was the most objectionable of all relations.

"You will not tell him I am here?" pleaded Molly.

"Of course not; but I fear he will discover it. If he does, I shall take care to show him how we all love and value you!"

But Molly had another question to ask.

"Will Mr. Durant—I mean, are they to be married soon?"

"At Easter, I believe."

"I should like to see her!"

"Should you? I can't understand that!"

"It is not her fault," said Molly, wistfully. "I hope he loves her, and will be good to her."

"I don't think there is any love on either side!" and with this remark Lady Bruce sped away.

Molly watched the arrival from the schoolroom window, herself carefully screened from view. She decided that her lost love was

older and graver. She could form no opinion of Miss Hurst, she was so muffled in furs; but she liked the face of the tall, silver-haired man who accompanied the young couple.

"That's baby's godfather!" communicated Miss Blanche, her eldest pupil. "That's why he was christened James Tempest Ogilvie. He's such a dear old man!"

Two or three days passed, and Molly managed to prevent a meeting with any of the guests, but it was a work of difficulty; and she was not sorry when, one morning, Lady Bruce came up and said everyone had gone to skate on the lake.

"So you see, Molly," she whispered, kindly, "you need not be a prisoner any longer. I have been quite troubled to think how much you have had to keep up here. The whole house and all the grounds except the west plantation will be quite safe."

"And he does not know?"

"He has not an idea. The Marquis was beginning a lamentation the other night that you never came down to sing to us; but I frowned at him so emphatically that he stopped in the middle of his sentence before he had spoken your name."

It was just a year since Molly and Keith Durant had met, and the twelve months had charged her.

Keith had found a pretty child wandering in the woods; but it was a beautiful girl who walked briskly down the long avenues of the Grange, a little maiden clinging to either hand. The face had gained in expression and delicacy of colouring. Fresh country air, repose, and tranquil life had given the roundness to Molly's cheeks they had lacked before. The brown eyes did not look unnaturally large now, and the long fur-trimmed jacket and sealskin toque set off the graceful figure to perfection.

The children were bent on picking violets for their mother. Lady Bruce loved them better than any flower; and Molly had presided over the gathering of so many that they had lost their old painful associations. She could pick a violet or even place a knot of them in her dress now without the dull, strange pain their fragrance used always to give her in the first days of her great sorrow.

She was playing with the large retriever, who always attended them in their walks, when, looking up, she perceived that Blanche and Evelyn had found a friend. A moment's burning blush, and she was composed as ever, even though she knew this was the old gentleman who had come with Mr. Durant and his fiancée. This was Lord Ogilvie, the grandfather whom Keith had once told her "must love her dearly."

Perhaps if she had had to meet him as Keith's betrothed, knowing much depended on the impression she made, Molly might have been anxious and ill at ease. Now she felt quite indifferent. It could matter nothing what opinion the Earl formed of her, so her manner was quite free from all constraint or nervousness. She was just her own sweet self; and when Blanche tugged her forward for an introduction, she put her disengaged hand into Lord Ogilvie's as though she had been meeting earls all her life.

But she was hardly prepared for the change in his face, when Blanche answered, fondly,—

"This is our governess! Her name is Lester; but we call her Miss Molly!"

Lord Ogilvie turned pale. He did not look searchingly at Molly as though to ask if he had seen her before. He did not seem trying to puzzle out of whom she reminded him. It seemed more as though he recognized in her someone he knew.

"A pretty name!" he said, when he had recovered his agitation.

"Are you staying here, Miss Lester?"

"She lives here," declared the children. "She teaches us, Lord Ogilvie. She is our Miss Molly!"

The Earl smiled.

"No need to ask if they are fond of you. Have you little brothers and sisters of your own, Miss Lester?"

Molly shook her head.

"Oh no. My parents died when I was a baby, and I am their only child!"

"She is just nineteen!" said Evey, confidently; "for Miss Molly had a birthday last week, and we all had a large plum cake!"

Lord Ogilvie smiled.

"What a great age! And are you happy here, Miss Lester?"

He showed so much anxiety for the reply that Molly began to wonder if in that interview with him, when he refused his consent to his grandson marrying her, Keith had spoken of her by name. If so, and the Earl recalled it, perhaps some remorseful scruple made him glad that she should have found an easy home.

"I am quite happy," said Molly, gently. "Lady Bruce is as kind to me as she can be. I have nothing to do but teach these dear little girls!"

Lord Ogilvie joined the two, and walked with them to the house. His manner to Molly was quite fatherly in its kindness. She wondered how he could have played the part Keith's letter assigned to him, and asked herself again and again whether he recognized the name as that of the young lady he had so sternly refused to receive as a grandchild.

She was not long left in doubt.

"Do you come from London, Miss Lester?" asked the Earl, suddenly, as they reached the house.

She shook her head.

"I have never been to London since I can remember, though I believe I was born there."

Lord Ogilvie looked puzzled.

"I am sure you are not a north countrywoman."

"No! My mother came from Netherton, and when she was dying she took me to her brother, who lives there. I was brought up with his children. I never knew any place but Netherton until I came here."

They were at the schoolroom door. Lord Ogilvie put out his hand.

"My dear!" he said simply. "I cannot explain it to you now; but you have made me happier than I ever expected to be again in this world." And before Miss Molly had recovered from her amazement the old nobleman had left her.

"Is it not annoying," said Lady Bruce to the governess that evening when she came into the schoolroom dressed for dinner, "Lord Ogilvie has been called to London on business. He goes up by the night mail; and, unless he can dispose of his business in a few hours, he can't be back for Christmas Eve!"

"I am very sorry. We met him to-day in the grounds, and he was so kind. I hope no trouble has summoned him home?"

"I don't think so. He was very mysterious about his errand; but he looked quite radiant. I was glad to see him so cheerful, for I think his beautiful heiress gives him a great deal of trouble."

"Miss Hurst! But I thought she was going to be married?"

"And therefore the trouble of her should fall on her future husband! A very reasonable idea, only it is not the case. Molly, I don't defend Keith in the least for the way he treated you. I felt before he came I should hate him; but since he has been here I have actually grown to pity him. I never saw anyone so changed. I think that accident must have left some injury to his constitution after all!"

Molly started.

"What accident?"

"Did you never hear of it? I suppose it was just after he treated you so badly. The day he left Allonby Towers there was a fearful fog in London. He was knocked down and run over by a cab. When he was carried home he was perfectly insensible for days and weeks. He was hovering between life and death."

The strangest expression had come to Molly's face. Surprise, relief, joy, sorrow, and self-reproach were all blended there, with a kind of choked sob, and she caught the Marchioness' hand in tears.

"Dear Lady Bruce! You said once I might trust you—that you would keep anything I told you secret!"

"So I will."

"You will let me tell you all, and try to help me understand it?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And you won't let any one know?"

Evelyn Bruce put her arm round the girl's trembling form.

"Trust me, dear, and I will be as faithful to you as though I was your sister. Believe me, though I feel grieved to see Keith Durant so altered, I can never forget his conduct to you."

"But I begin to think I have been mistaken."

"Mistaken!"

"Listen! We were engaged the day before he left Allonby. He told me no one must know of it until he had spoken to Lord Ogilvie, but nothing his grandfather could say would change his wishes. Oh! Lady Bruce, I loved him so! I seemed to feel the difference in our rank might make his marrying me an injury to him. I begged him, if when he was away he regretted speaking to me, to let me know. If he did not come to my uncle's in a week, he said I might believe he had altered; but he should be there if he was alive."

A strange light came to Lady Bruce.

"I begin to understand!"

"He went home the next day, and the morning but one after I received his letter. It was a cruel letter, Lady Bruce, and it almost broke my heart. Not only did he call his love for me a passing folly, but he hinted that Lord Ogilvie would be disposed to offer me a substantial reward for setting his grandson free!"

The Marchioness started.

"And you believed it?"

"What could I think?" asked Molly, slowly. "The paper bore Keith's monogram and crest; the note was written in a clear, manly hand; and I knew there was a gulf between us, though he would never let me say so."

"That letter must have been written very soon after Mr. Durant left Allonby?"

"The very day after."

"Then Molly, listen to me. For weeks after the accident Keith was unconscious. The day that letter was written he was hovering between life and death. I do not ask what you think yourself. I tell you as a fact that Keith Durant wrote that letter is simply impossible!"

The tears ran down her cheeks of a tender, womanly nature; the matter grieved her sorely.

"Don't cry!" said Molly, gently. "Don't be sorry for me. I am quite happy now!"

Lady Bruce looked amazed.

"Happy!"

"Don't you see, this gives back my faith in him. I may go on believing him the best and noblest of men. I need not regret my love and trust now, for he is worthy of both."

"But he is going to marry his cousin!"

"Yes. I hope they will be happy."

"Molly, you are too angelic. Do you think, after loving you, a man could be happy with a heartless, icy beauty, like Miss Hurst? All I marvel is, that Keith should not have come to you and insisted on an explanation."

Molly blushed crimson.

"When I got that cruel letter I was almost beside myself. I packed up some flowers—the only thing I had ever received from him—and sent them back to him, and I wrote a letter asking him to forget he had ever known me."

"And you think that letter reached him? You do not fancy the same hand which forged those cruel lines to you intercepted it?"

Molly sighed.

"I think he had my letter, and thought me faithless. He must go on thinking me so for his betrothed's sake."

Lady Bruce differed.

"He belonged to you first, and he loved you as he never can love Sybil, Molly. To my mind, he ought to be told the truth."

Molly clung to her in an agony of entreaty.

"You promised to keep my secret?"

"And I will keep it if you wish it; but, Molly, it is sacrificing two hearts to a foolish scruple. I tell you Keith loves you, and would be happier in poverty with you at his side than he can be with all his cousin's wealth."

Molly shook her head.

"You forget," she said, simply, "he is bound in honour to Miss Hurst. He must not break his word and tarnish his name just because I love him."

Lady Bruce went down to dinner thinking the love affairs of her luckless friends were going most decidedly contrary. She little guessed deliverance for Mr. Durant was coming from a quarter whence she least expected it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THAT same afternoon, an hour or two before the *tête-à-tête* between Molly and Lady Bruce, the beautiful heiress, Sybil Hurst, was pacing up and down one of the sheltered walks in the picturesque grounds, leaning on the arm of a gentleman who regarded her with most ardent admiration, and who was not her promised husband.

"Believe me," spoke the young man's honeyed tones, "he is not worthy of you; he seeks you for your fortune, not yourself. Keith Durant at this very moment is passionately in love with another!"

Miss Hurst had no devoted attachment for her cousin. Her motives for accepting him we know already.

Sybil loved her own way, and thought she would enjoy great freedom as her cousin's wife, but dearer even to her than liberty was her self-love. She could not brook a slight to her vanity; she was quite content that Keith should not trouble her with demonstrations of affection so long as she believed him indifferent to all her sex, but she would not brook the bare idea of a rival in his heart.

She smiled a little scornfully as Herbert Moselle made his charge.

"You don't understand Mr. Durant," she said, lightly. "His is not an ardent nature. It is not in him to love passionately. The affection which he gives me is the strongest feeling he can show."

Mr. Moselle smiled.

"You are easily deceived, Miss Hurst!"

"I am not in the least deceived. You cannot mention any girl to whom my cousin has ever shown attention. He is emphatically indifferent to ladies!"

"May I ask you one question, Miss Hurst?"

"Half-a-dozen if you like."

"And you will answer them?"

"Yes."

"Even though it goes against your theory?"

"Yes."

"I think one question will suffice. Did you ever give your cousin a violet?"

"I never gave Keith a flower in my life. Mr. Moselle, you won't understand me. I keep telling you we are not a sentimental couple. Why can't you believe me?"

"You never gave Mr. Durant a flower, and yet I saw him only yesterday press a faded violet passionately to his lips!"

"You saw him?"

"It was in the library. I don't believe he had any idea I was there. He stood by the fire, and seemed about to burn something. It was just a faded flower. One time he held it over the flames, but his resolution failed him. He pressed it, as I told you, passionately to his lips, and replaced it in his pocket-book!"

Sybil's voice changed. It sounded harsh.

"How am I to believe this?"

"I will swear it. If you need proof ask Mr. Durant yourself! Why, he holds violets dearer than other flowers!"

"I think I will."

"You will not betray me?"

She shook her head.

"And, Miss Hurst, when you have proved the truth of my words, will you remember that while life lasts I shall be your slave?"

Fortune favoured Sybil. She met Keith as she was walking alone towards the house.

"Where are you going?"

"For a loiter in the grounds. Will you come with me, Sybil?"

Miss Hurst agreed, and led the way to the place where the violets grew—the very spot where Lord Ogilvie had met Molly and the children that morning.

"Pick me some violets please, Keith! I want to wear some to-night in my hair."

Mr. Durant hesitated.

"Don't wear such stupid things, Sybil!" he said, quickly. "Come with me to the conservatory, and I will find you something better worth the honour of appearing in your hair!"

"I want violets."

But he did not attempt to pick them. Stooping down, she gathered a few, and held them towards him.

"Don't they smell delicious?"

But Keith was deadly pale.

"Sybil, I don't often have a fancy, but I can't bear violets. Their very perfume makes me feel ill!"

She turned on him with a mocking laugh.

"Your sentiments have changed lately, haven't they, Mr. Durant?"

"I don't understand you."

"You did not always object to violets, since you carry a faded one near your heart!"

Keith started.

"Who has dared —?"

"Don't get into a passion," said his cousin, calmly. "When we two agreed to be engaged, I believe I told you I did not believe in romantic sentiment?"

"I believe you did."

"But though I do not expect such a feeling for myself, I strongly object to your cherishing it for another. Answer me, once for all. When you told me you could offer me no rapturous devotion was it because you had already exhausted the feeling?"

"Sybil!"

Sybil dashed the violets from her hands, and stood before him with flashing eyes.

"I will be answered. Before you did me the honour to propose to share my fortune, had you bestowed your heart upon another?"

"When I asked you to marry me there was no woman in the world I would rather have made my wife, but after your taunt about your fortune —"

She interrupted him.

"I am not going to bear the imputation of having been jilted, sir. You shall not have the satisfaction of taking the initiative. From this moment our engagement is at an end! You understand? I distinctly refuse to be married for my money, and from to-day I am free! My grandfather is going to London by the night mail. I shall accompany him, and place myself under your mother's care. You can give whatever explanation of our rupture you please. You will hardly venture on the true one—that I discovered the real reason of your wish to marry me!"

She swept past him, leaving Keith with but one sentiment—relief. At last he was free. He had no longer to act a part.

He went in search of Lord Ogilvie, and told him briefly Sybil had broken off the engagement, and wished to return with him to London.

The Earl took the news so cheerfully that he was relieved.

"I thought you would have been sorry?"

"I am very thankful!" said the Earl. "There is only one thing troubles me. Are you quite sure the rupture came from Sybil?"

"I am positive! She admits it herself. She says I shall not have the satisfaction of saying I jilted her."

"Thank Heaven!"

Keith began to think his grandfather was going out of his mind, but Lord Ogilvie smiled reassuringly.

"I loved her mother dearly, Keith; and her father was like a son to me, but I never took to Sybil. I have grieved for years to think she must be mistress of Ogilvie!"

Keith smiled half sadly.

"She will still be that!"

"And you regret it?"

"No," said Keith, thankfully. "Grandfather, I had found out my engagement was a great mistake, and I feel grateful to Sybil for ending it! A man should never marry a wife richer than himself."

Lord Ogilvie laughed.

"Don't say that, please, Keith, for I rather think I am going to turn matchmaker. Your mother's schemes have failed so signally that it seems time I tried to find you a wife!"

"I shall never marry, my lord!"

Mr. Durant contrived to explain the change in his circumstances to Lord Bruce before dinner.

The Marquis smiled.

"If you ask my opinion, Durant, you are to be congratulated. I never cared much for heiresses, and, after knowing Miss Hurst, shall care still less in future."

"And you think the rupture need cause no change in my plans?"

"I think I shall be just as glad to have you here a disengaged man as with the title of Miss Hurst's fiancé! I'll announce the fact for you. And as the young lady is leaving, really I can't see any need for your visit being curtailed!"

"But Lady Bruce?"

Evelyn's husband smiled.

"To tell you a secret, my wife never liked your cousin, so I don't think you need fear her being hard on you."

Keith looked perplexed.

"Until I came here this time I always flattered myself I was a favourite with the Marchioness, but I fear now I have offended her. She always avoids talking to me."

"Nonsense!"

CHAPTER IX. AND LAST.

CHRISTMAS EVE! Lord Ogilvie had had his interview with Lady Alice Durant, and told her, briefly, the engagement between the cousins was over. Then, in a strange, hoarse tone, he asked,—

"Why did you deceive me all these years, Alice? You nursed James in his last illness? You knew he left a child?"

"You never asked me," said Lady Alice, sullenly. "I told you his wife was dead; and she *did* die a year later."

"And left a child?"

Lady Alice shifted her ground.

"What made you think so?"

"Only that I saw a girl with Jim's eyes, which told me her name was Lester. Stop!" for Lady Alice seemed about to interrupt him. "I have every proof! She has been brought up as the niece of lawyer Cameron, of Netherton; and I remember perfectly well that the girl for whose sake Jim left home and friends was called Mary Cameron! I have the certificate of their marriage in my desk."

"I thought the child was a boy?" said Alice, in a strange, subdued tone. "It was for Keith's sake I did it. A boy would have stood for ever between him and Ogilvie!"

The look in her father's eyes made her ashamed, but he only said,—

"Tell me all!"

"You know I was away at the time of James's leaving home. I never heard his wife's maiden name, or where she came from. His ravings in his last hours made you think she was dead. I knew better. I felt from the very way he tried to cling to life she was yet alive. I found an address in his pocket-book; and when he was buried I went there and secretly made inquiries. I bribed the landlady well, and she admitted there was a child—a strong, healthy child of a year old. The mother was but sickly, she said, but the child was likely to live."

"And she told you it was a boy?"

"No; but Jim seemed to speak of a boy. Perhaps the fear I was in made me take up the idea!"

"And you let mother and child risk starvation?"

"I told the landlady to let me know if ever anything happened. A year later she sent me word the widow was dead. I never knew the name she went by!"

"Jim married her in his own name, but she was known only as Mrs. Lester. Oh, Alice! your cruel ambition has well-nigh wrecked your son's life, and has blighted mine for eighteen years!"

"I did it for Keith's sake!"

"And nearly drove him into a marriage he detested! You do not know your son as I do. There is not one fibre of love for Sybil Hurst in his heart; and yet, if this disclosure had come out while she was yet engaged to him, he would have clung to her as faithfully as though she had been his own choice!"

"And—what do you mean to do?"

"I shall return to Woodside for Christmas, as I promised the Marchioness; but I shall write to Mr. Cameron. In a very short time I expect my grandchild will be acknowledged publicly as the Honorable Mary Tempest, and installed as mistress of my home!"

"As mistress?"

Lord Ogilvie looked at her sternly.

"I will make an ample allowance for your wants, Alice, and you and Sybil can make a home together!"

"You mean we shall be exiled from Ogilvie?"

"I mean I cannot forget that for eighteen years you have left my boy's child to grow up in poverty and hardship. Had I found her an ignorant servant girl, instead of a high-bred maiden, it would have been your deed. You *knew* how I mourned for Jim, and yet you would not give me the comfort of ministering to his child!"

"My poor, dear Sybil!"

"Your 'poor, dear Sybil' will mourn her loss of wealth I daresay. You had better consult her as to the choice of a home!"

A dull red flush edged the widow's cheek.

"Is this girl known as Molly Lester? Is her uncle a lawyer at Netherton?"

"Yes."

Lady Alice groaned.

"Then fate has been hard indeed. But for my prudence she would now be Keith's wife!"

"What do you mean?"

"That he was in love with her, and asked me to consult you about it! I took advantage of his illness to settle the matter to my satisfaction!"

It was Christmas Eve, and there was to be a dance at Woodside. Lady Bruce insisted on Molly being present.

"You know, dear!" she urged, "Keith has been as much deceived as you, and he is free now!"

Molly blushed scarlet.

"But —"

"I am not asking you to tell him how mistaken you have both been. All I want is for you to meet!"

"Won't it look as if I wanted him to—to like me?"

"I fancy he has never left off doing that," said Lady Bruce, quietly.

"Now, Molly, I mean to have my own way!"

She had herself prepared a dress for her little friend—much such another simple toilet as the one of last year; only this time, instead of snowdrops, long sprays of trailing ivy were twined with the sweet purple violets.

"I like ivy," said the Marchioness. "It means fidelity. Molly, you look charming; I hope this will be a happy Christmas Day."

She would dearly have liked to tell Mr. Durant how he was mistaken, but this seemed beyond her powers. It was no formal ball, just a carpet dance, beginning very soon after dinner, and she did manage to say to Keith at that repeat,—

"I want you to do me a favour!"

"What can it be?"

"I have persuaded the children's governess to come down to-night, and she knows no one. I want you to dance with her."

He smiled.

"With pleasure; but I warn you I am no amusing companion for a learned lady!"

Lady Bruce laughed.

"Molly is not a learned lady, only a pretty child! Aunt Allonby sent her to me last spring, and we all love her dearly."

Keith started.

"Lady Bruce, can you be speaking of Miss Lester?"

"Why not?"

"I thought—I believed she had married Sir Lewis Allonby?"

"Why, Lewis is in Egypt!"

"I suppose it was broken off."

"The engagement never existed. I fancy—this is just my own suspicion, I have never breathed it even to Molly—I fancy Lewis would have asked nothing better than to win our Molly!"

"And he has twenty thousand a year!"

"Well, you know all girls are not mercenary. Molly always says she shall never marry at all. Bruce and I think her far too pretty for an old maid. If you will dance with her, get one of the children to introduce you."

But Keith knew a better plan. Blanche confided to him Miss Molly was ready dressed, waiting in the schoolroom till they went to fetch her, and Mr. Durant determined to do the fetching himself. He knew where the schoolroom was.

Miss Molly was sitting in the firelight, thinking a little sadly of the difference between this dance and her first ball, when someone came gently in, and, closing the door, stood watching her—a strange tumult of hope and fear contending for the mastery at his heart.

"Molly!"

"Keith!"

Only that, and yet both felt the gulf between them was gone.

"Why did you write that cruel letter, Molly?"

"How else could I answer yours?"

"I never wrote to you in my life!"

And word for word she repeated the cruel lines that had gone near to break her heart.

"And you believed I wrote it?"

"I believed it till three days ago!"

"And then?"

"I heard at the very time I received it you were dangerously ill!"

"Ay, hovering between life and death. I wished death had gained the battle, Molly, when I had your note!"

Molly was crying to herself.

"You must have thought me an ignoble creature," he said, passionately. "Where was your faith?"

She looked at him with a world of tenderness in her brown eyes.

"I thought you had mistaken your own feelings?"

"Molly, I have never ceased from loving you, not for a single day!"

"And yet——"

"And yet I engaged myself to another. Molly, I thought you had married Lewis Allonby. My heart was sore at your desertion, and I don't think I cared what became of me. I never cared for Sybil!"

"Then you treated her very cruelly."

"I don't think so. Anyway, Molly, she gave me my freedom."

"But she will forgive you?"

"I have no intention of asking her!"

"Lovers quarrels are always made up again," returned Molly, quietly.

"I am very glad to hear it," and there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes, "but that hardly affects me and Sybil. We may have been engaged, but we were certainly not lovers."

Molly picked a flower to pieces, her face cast down, for she could not meet the loving glance of Keith's.

"Molly!"

"You will be wanted downstairs, Mr. Durant. Lady Bruce relies on you for dancing."

"Lady Bruce asked me to dance with you, and I mean to presently. Molly, do you know what gave me my freedom?"

"No."

He showed her the little faded violet.

"It has been a magic talisman, Molly. You gave it me the first time we met; and even while I thought you another's I could never part with it."

"But Miss Hurst?"

"I cannot tell how she guessed it, or whether it was but an idle fancy. I objected to gather violets for her. I never can look at them without thinking of you, and I could not bear the idea of gathering them for her. I told her I would choose her any other flowers, but not violets. She declared my feelings had changed. I must have admired violets once, since I carried a faded one near my heart."

"She will forgive you."

"Only I shall not ask her. Molly, you are treating me very badly!"

"I!"

"We have been engaged nearly a year," said Keith, gravely. "You know I belonged to you before ever I spoke to Sybil. My darling! but for believing you faithless I should have been loyal to you in word as I have been in heart. Molly, can't you forgive me, and let things be as they once were?"

"But your grandfather?"

"Molly, I won't hear of anyone but ourselves. I won't take 'No' for an answer unless you tell me you have ceased to love me!"

And as Molly did not attempt to utter such a gigantic falsehood, Keith's arms were round her the next moment, and her bowed head rested happily on his shoulder.

"And you are quite prepared to be a poor man's wife, Miss Molly, and to have nasty people say I married you out of spite because the heiress jilted me?"

"Quite."

"Molly! I pity Lewis Allonby, for I believe he loved you too."

"I saw you first," she whispered.

"Well, as soon as Christmas is over, I shall go and tell Mr. Cameron the story I wished to tell ten months ago. I hope he will be a merciful guardian, Miss Molly, since until you come of age you are under his authority."

"She is under nobody's authority but mine," said Lord Ogilvie, who had entered unperceived, and taken in the state of things with a glance. "If you wish to marry my granddaughter, young air, it is me you have to reckon with!"

"Your granddaughter!"

The Earl smiled at their amazement.

"The world must know her as Molly Lester a little longer, but in a few weeks I hope she will take her place as Mary Lester Tempest, my son Jim's only child, Keith," and his eyes glistened. "Unless you jilt the poor child, you will have to marry an heiress after all."

Keith and Molly looked at each other in amazement as the truth flashed came slowly home to them. Lord Ogilvie stood behind them, his hand resting on the soft, brown head.

"Keith, I know the story of the past better than you think for, and I feel you have both suffered enough. I would gladly have kept Jim's child as my very own, but I will yield her up to you a Christmas gift!"

Some time in April there was a simple wedding in Ogilvie village church. The bride was a great heiress, the groom a man of narrow means, who had not long since been engaged to another. Yet none who looked at the perfect love and trust stamped on the two young faces could have doubted this was one of the marriages made in Heaven—a union of hearts, not hands!

The years have rolled on since that wedding-day. Lewis Allonby has returned to the Towers, and now sits for the county. Miss Hurst married Herbert Moselle, and—report goes—made him repent his bargain.

Lady Alice, penitent and forgiven, visits her relations at Ogilvie Castle; and then, too, Uncle John, his wife, and the girls, have been made happy by appearing as guests. But the friend most welcome there to Lord Ogilvie and his grandchildren is Evelyn Lady Bruce.

She it was who stood godmother to Molly's firstborn child—a little daughter—who received no old time-honoured family name, but was called Violet, in memory of the flower so linked with her mother's love-story.

And stored away among Keith's most valued treasures there rests a faded flower. To careless eyes it may seem "Only a Violet," but to Mr. Durant's mind he owes to it the most precious of his blessings—his much-loved wife. He will never forget how, in the winter firelight, he heard his grandfather's voice declare,—

"I yield her up to you—A CHRISTMAS GIFT."

[THE END.]

